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Video Games Anime Media Gear

play

2003 Year in Review

Over 30 pages of the year's best: every console, every category

StarCraft Ghost

What you can't see can definitely kill you

Peripheral ///

Shoot the glass

Take aim and feel the kick with Pelican's new Silent Scope rifle

Media ///

Devil May Cry

Dreamwave's latest Capcom comic has a devil inside

Anime ///

Bandai's Yukikaze

Top Gun meets Ghost in the Shell meets Evangelion! Masterful!

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Korn's Jonathan Davis, Top Ten DVDs of 2003, Metroid: Zero Mission, Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles

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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Violence

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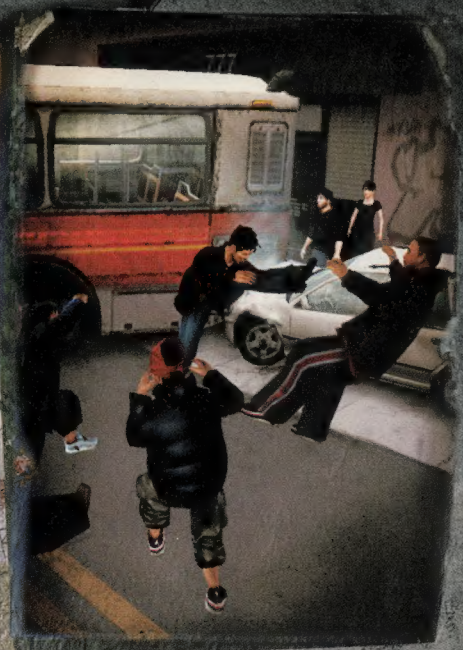
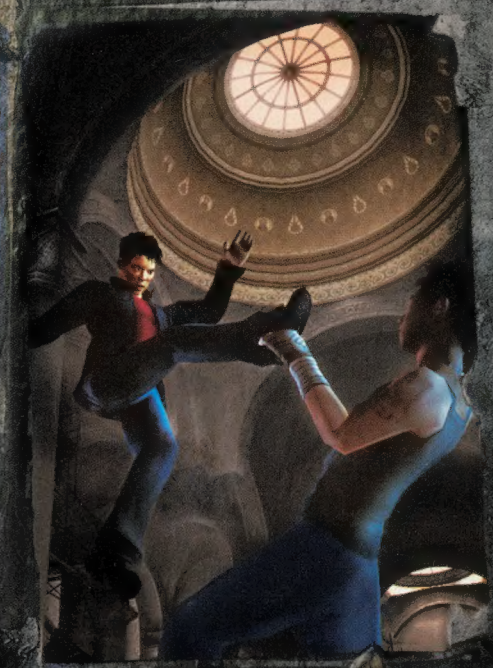
JET LI RISE TO HONOR





A dying man's last wish. An undercover cop who's running out of time. Jet Li is Kit Yun in Rise to Honor, the story of a cop sworn to fulfill his duty, yet bound by a promise to a powerful crime lord. Now Kit must enter a shadowy world where, to preserve his honor, he'll have to risk his life. But as his enemies will soon learn, sometimes the one who is most honorable…is also the most deadly.

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Blood
Use of Alcohol
Violence

Interplay VIVENDI UNIVERSAL GAMES Licensed by Hasbro Properties Group BLACK ISLE STUDIOS XBOX PlayStation.2

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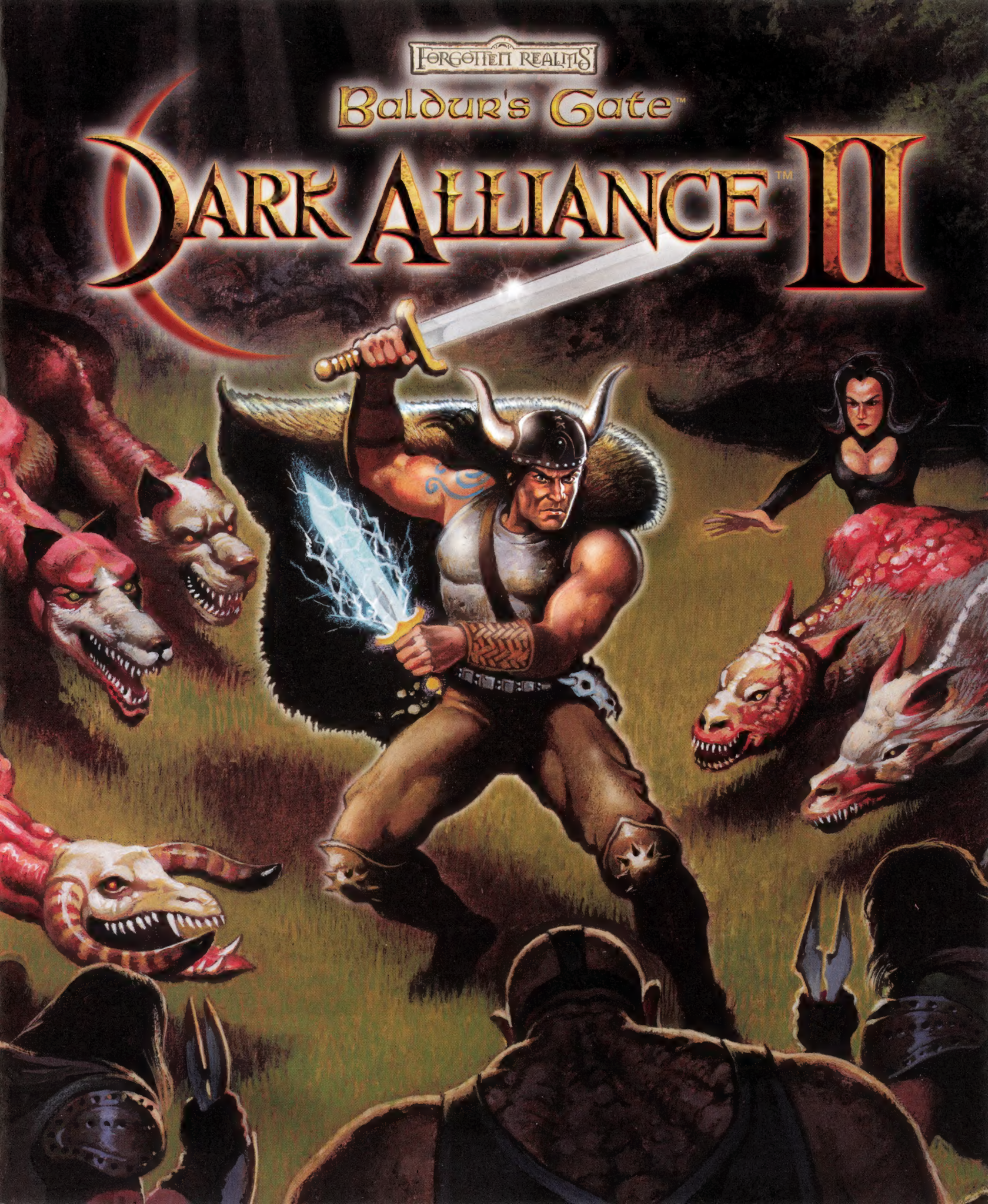
FORGOTTEN REALMS
Baldur's Gate™
DARK ALLIANCE™ II

Issue 26
Volume 3 Issue 2
February 2004

Next Wave

Whoever coined the phrase "time flies when you're having fun" likely had no concept of the video game, otherwise he might have said, "Holy crap! It's midnight already? I thought it was like 6 o'clock!" It's hard to believe we're already playing the back nine of the current generation of consoles, but with Xbox heading into its third year, now a permanent fixture in the world of home console, Nintendo already well into developing their next machine and the Sony elite tooling up for PS3, we're getting close to the home stretch—one final round away from whatever's next.

The next generation of games is on drawing boards right now. 2004 will see the further evolution of portable gaming as Sony moves in on Nintendo's home turf with the PSP (to be followed undoubtedly by an announcement of some type from Nintendo) and then, come 2005, we'll be staring at new screens from all three camps, drooling once again at the prospect of beginning anew. Looking back over the year, certain patterns have obviously emerged as the industry continued to move further into the mainstream, but so far (keep everything crossed) the result seems to be less crap and more solid games in pretty much every genre, and so, at least for now, all is very well. The bits and pieces of info we're getting about games slated for the next round of consoles echo the same, and so, it would seem, we just might survive the rigors of commercialism after all.

But what exactly will the next round of consoles bring? The genres have all seemingly developed in terms of structure, 3D now firmly embedded as the future gamescape, so where might we see innovation? It goes without saying that there will be a marked jump in graphics technology: smoother, more realistic models, 60 FPS across the board, more bump mapping, bigger vistas. But how will developers push the innovation envelope beyond today's basic 3D structure...or perhaps the question is whether or not they need to? What I'm hoping to see, above all, is the end of loading and the evolution of the turn-based RPG, where rather than load into a menu-based battle engine you could see the enemy coming from afar, the menus sliding into focus as soon as either party's attacks are within reach, then, once victorious, rather than shifting to the obligatory stats screen, pillage the bodies (carcasses or whatever) in real time and move on. Imagine combing the countryside, your party in full view (the same beautiful models all the time, from cutscene to battle to world map), seeing the next town or village a mile or so off, as well as the bustling creatures in between...now that would be something. The true real-time turn-based RPG will be a revelation in gaming—mark my words. I'm also waiting for the MMOP (Massively Multi-player Online Platformer)...but that is another story. After that I want holograms. My question to you as we head into the next, next generation is what do you hope to see with the next round of consoles? Let us be your conduit to the developers; they're all ears these days.

"It's hard to believe we're already playing the back nine of the current generation of consoles..."

Dave Halverson Editor-in-chief
dhalverson@playmagazine.com

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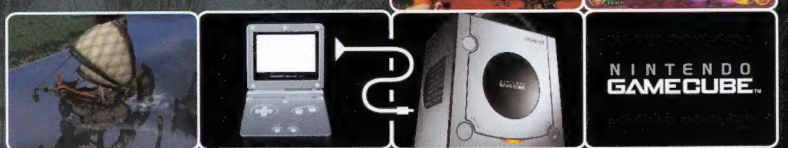

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Fantasy Violence

FINAL FANTASY CRYSTAL CHRONICLES

NINTENDO GAMECUBE™

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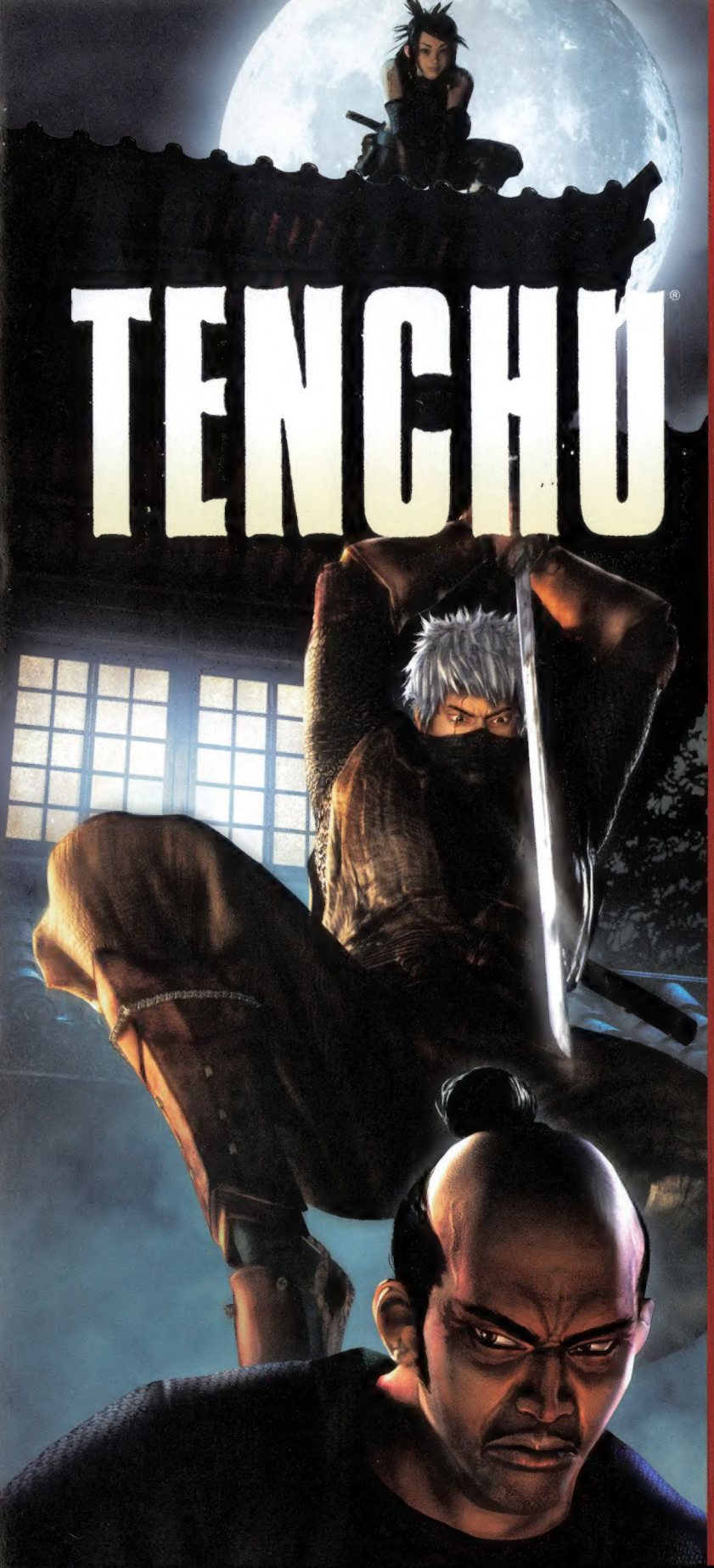

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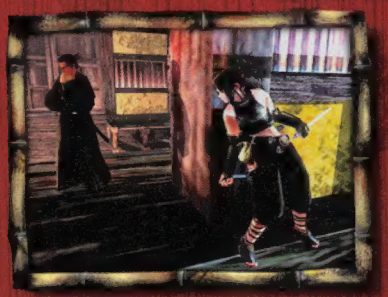

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MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence

XBOX LIVE

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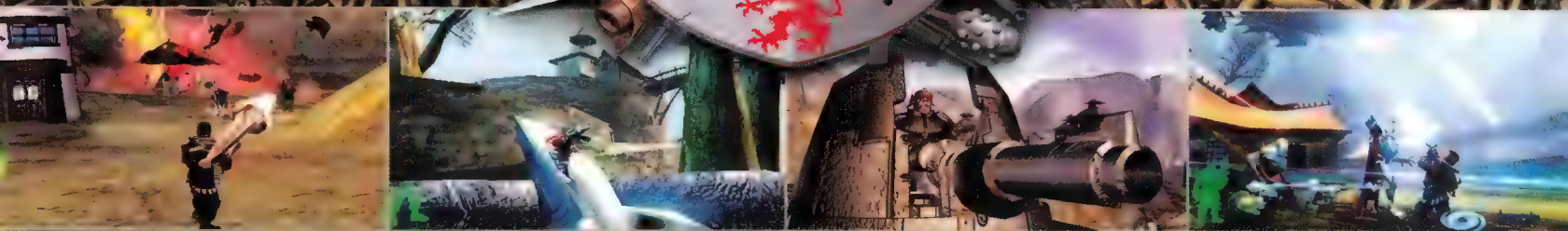
THERE'S NO KILL LIKE OVERKILL.



Meet the Lionhearts. A smack-talking rag-tag band of rebels bound on an impossible quest. With an arsenal of outrageous weapons, they're destined for victory in 12,000 bullets or less. If they can make it through an army of psychotic robots and wall-smashing Goliaths, they just might save the world...if they don't burn it down first.

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XBOX

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

STUDIOS

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LUCAS Arts

playback

letters@playmagazine.com

Letter of the Month

I am encouraged each month to see you bettering the magazine each time out and even adding 3 of my specific suggestions that I am sure you were hearing elsewhere as well. I love the monthly top 5 that Virgin is sponsoring, and the review system is so much improved from the 5 star bit. With all the quality games this season, every other review would have been a 5 star and no one would know what to buy. I also really love the handheld section in the rear of the mag. I love my GBA SP to no end and am glad the staff could grow enough to have a dedicated portable writer. Tell Chris I think he is doing a fine job covering the Nintendo cash cow.

I am also very impressed with the quality of writing and ideas on both your editorial page and the letter section. I feel for the first time I could share my video game magazine with others and they could see the intellect and thoughtfulness that is there at the depths of this artform. My wife (not a gamer, well not until Wario Ware) read the letter section of the Viewtiful Joe issue as I drove cross country and she was caught up in the amazing writing and thoughtful questions. She really began to see how your magazine is a good read just like a quote unquote "more serious and thought provoking publication." She was blown away when she read your article on the decline of the industry to squabbling for shelf space and tie in products that threaten the innovation and grass roots aspects of the artform that have pushed it this far.

All in all you are becoming a read that increases my video game enjoyment, but more importantly causes me to reflect on issues, such as consumerism, responsibility of entertainment to educate, and the globalization of our world that is destroying small and precious cultures. The last came to mind as a parallel to how the economic monster of video games is destroying the culture of upstart, non-licensed, developmental genius. Sonic Team, Naughty Dog, Treasure, Rare; these are my most loved developers, yet none may have had the chance to succeed if they were beginning their careers today. Where does that leave our future? These are just some thoughts and that is the whole point.

Finally, as someone of deep faith I was very interested in your December cover story. I have often thought in my head that video games are far too often not used for expressing some of the deeper aspects of life. I had dreamed myself of story lines and gaming ideas that would incorporate issues of origin, salvation, and redemption. I am not LDS, and I do not know all that Glyphx Games are hoping to accomplish through Advent Rising, but knowing a little about Mormon faith, it is clear this game is meant on some level to represent core values of their beliefs to a larger audience. It is a neat indication of where games may be headed in my opinion. This upcoming generation sees video games as an ordinary part of life. I think it is a powerful cultural tool to instill values and teach people about things that run deeper than pure enjoyment.

Two quick questions: The back 10 pages or so of my latest issue, "Advent Rising" seems to be printed on less quality paper. Just wondering what that was about, if you know what I am referring to. Also, sometimes you seem to review games a month or two ahead of other magazines (Wario World, P.N. 03, Primal, Voodoo Vince, etc), but sometimes other games you review seem to lag behind other mags by a month or two. Why are some early and some late?

Now to my selfish pleas. First, please do a GBA SP top ten in your year in review issue, it's my favorite issue of the year every year. Second, in order to appreciate the future, you have to know that past and I would love to better know the foundation of the years gone by. I own a Saturn, PlayStation, N64 and Dreamcast that I want to get the most out of. If you could be so kind as to give me a list of must-own games for each system, just the AAA stuff, I would greatly value your insight. Maybe even if it is only 8 or 10 games for each system, just the absolute cream of the crop.

Thanks for your time,
R. J.

Sorry we couldn't fit your entire letter, R.J. Reviews fall ahead or behind due to our staggered lead times; the paper snafu we'll have to check on—that's really weird. The rest? I think you're going to like where we're going in '04.

Spiked Back At Ya

I was so glad to see Play tackle the Spike TV video game awards. I, like Dave, have an unbridled passion for gaming. I felt as if Spike TV executives had come through my television, smacked me in the face, and sodomized my mother. 18 years I've been gaming (considering I'm only 22, that's pretty impressive)...I have NEVER bared witness to such atrocities! I've suffered through countless "Video games are destroying our youth" specials on my local news, I've dealt with horrific advertising campaigns, and I've handled lack of recognition for games that deserved it. Spike TV took my favorite hobby/art form/entertainment medium, and made a complete mockery of it, as they drove any sort of decency gaming had going for it into the ground. Look, when It comes to video games, I'm serious about what I love. If there's going to be an awards show on about them, they'd better be about games, not strippers, popular music, and what ever else some worthless network exec can come up with with.

"I felt as if Spike TV executives had come through my television, smacked me in the face, and sodomized my mother."

Jamie B.

Play's UK

I'm curious about something. I read a lot of insightful, thought provoking opinion in your magazine, but not just from the staff, but even the readers as well. You seem to have a firm grasp on what makes games good or bad, much more so than a lot of the more sensationalist/jaded stuff I read elsewhere. Relatively new to games myself (PS was my first system) and over 25, until I found Play, I only read (well, bought) UK magazines as they seemed the only credible source when it came to the games I was really looking forward to. Anyway, getting back to my point, it's nice to have an American source with the same tone and review/preview standards. What I'm wondering is if the game industry knows this too. I mean, do the publishers and developers read the reviews and reader input? Do you guys have relationships so that you can tell them what your readers are thinking? I ask this because first of all I care but more because I'm really hoping that the companies are listening to what you are saying as much as the other magazines. Why are you so different anyway? UK magazines seem so plugged into "the scene" while here it seems everyone is going off in different directions depending on popular opinion, or what gets the most commercials. Anyway, just curious. Not that I agree with everything you guys say but whether or not I agree it's all genuine and consistent.

Screech

Developers get it, but often don't make the critical decisions. Publishers listen as well, to a degree. There are so many layers though. We're secretly all British, you know.

Needs help

I am an avid gamer and I have played since Intellivision, then NES, SNES, Sega Saturn, N64, DC, PS2, GameCube, and Xbox. I am 25 and I work at a bank. I wonder sometimes though if I play too many games? Sometimes I wonder if I play them too much that I forget to live and have a regular kind of life? At times I wonder if I'll ever be able to fall in with a special real girl? I have crushes on certain "virtual" girls in my games. Can you help me?

Scott

No.

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Our sincere thanks to Al Gore for creating the internet, otherwise, where would we go to pillage music, improve length and girth, gather facts about the Paris Hil...er, the human anatomy and enjoy Gaming FM, the only name you need to know for video game BGM past and present? In case you'd like to know more, here's the skinny from Ray Price, GFM founder and chief information officer.

gamingFM.com

The GFM crew: gracing your bandwidth with gaming's greatest BGM.

play: What inspired you to start Gaming FM?
Ray Price: Well, music never did anything for me as a child. I usually couldn't understand the words, or just didn't find the tune very catchy. I wasn't interested in learning to play an instrument or listen to any music growing up. All I cared about was playing video games, which I've been doing since 1977. My taste in music changed drastically one day in 1987 when a friend received a Nintendo Entertainment System. We clicked in Super Mario Bros., and I've been humming that tune ever since. There was something about that sound. Those simple waveforms sounded better to me than any song I had ever heard on the radio. I soon started recording soundtracks by putting games on pause and holding a tape recorder up to the TV and began to wonder about the people who created these songs. Why weren't they famous? Why were the musicians I didn't care about getting all the recognition? Why was my taste in music so different from everyone else?

Fast forward to 1991; I landed a job at a video game magazine and gained access to the inside of my beloved industry. I realized that there is a whole country of people who regard video game scores in the same manner as I do. It's called Japan. Not only do they love game music, they sell it on the shelves right next to the popular albums, and even hold concerts featuring this stuff! Boy, was I born in the wrong country. At a frenzied pace I began spending my paychecks on all the game music CDs from Japan I can get my hands on.

In 1997, I got internet access and began dabbling in HTML. Once I mastered that, I learned about SHOUTcast, the audio streaming technology that makes Gaming FM possible. I knew what I had to do. Starting with 80 MP3s and a cable modem, Gaming FM's predecessor, Radd Radio was born. Radd Radio went on to be featured in various publications including Yahoo! Internet Life and Spin Magazine. I soon realized that I wasn't alone in my music tastes. I decided it was time to take Radd Radio to the next level. So I gathered four very talented friends of mine and on January 1, 2003, Gaming FM was born. We've since grown to four separate stations and thousands of listeners worldwide.

I started Gaming FM because I believe game soundtracks and their composers deserve to be recognized here in America as they are in Japan. A video game section in American record stores has always been a dream of mine. We're not there yet, but we're definitely having an impact on pop culture.

What type of gamer would you say it's geared for?
We've tried to make Gaming FM as accessible as possible to all gamers. This is why we offer four separate stations for their listening pleasure. Each station is geared to a specific

"There was something about that sound. Those simple waveforms sounded better to me than any song I had ever heard on the radio."

type of gamer. And believe me; Gaming FM truly attracts gamers of all types, as evidenced by our discussion forums. Gamers from all over the world come together and discuss and even sometimes argue about their favorite or not-so-favorite songs. The spirit of gaming is alive here!

How deep is your play list? Any old Yuzo Koshiro?
By all means! We offer just about all of Mr. Koshiro's work, as well as Koji Kondo, Hip Tanaka, Nobuo Uematsu, Tommy Tallarico, you name it! As I said, we offer four stations; one of them is bound to have something you like!

The first is the Classic Console station. It features music for the old-schoolers. NES, SNES, Genesis and the like are all represented here.

We also broadcast the Modern Console station. This one is for today's gamer, featuring songs from Xbox, PS2, Dreamcast and many more.

The next is the Total PC station, featuring music for the hardcore enthusiast who'd never hold anything but a mouse.

My personal favorite, however, is the Complete Selection station, which combines the music from the other three stations as well as throwing in some arrangements that will blow you away. This station is for the non-discerning gamer.

What's your background in gaming?
I started gaming at the age of four. My father brought home a Fairchild Channel F (props if you remember that one!) game system and I have been hooked ever since. I literally grew up with gaming. Over the years my parents would remind me that gaming would never get me anywhere in life. Fortunately I proved them wrong by landing a job as an associate editor at Electronic Gaming Monthly magazine, and now I work at Gaming FM. As a result, I've had a chance to meet many of the very people responsible for the games and the soundtracks that I've enjoyed over the years. Life doesn't get any better!

Two other members of the Gaming FM crew are also former EGM staffers. The rest of the crew are all avid gamers of extremely varied tastes, which is good for the station since, between the five of us, many genres are represented.

Where do you see the site going in the future?
We are growing literally every day; the sky's the limit. I am very fortunate to have surrounded myself with extremely talented people without whom Gaming FM would not be where it is today. Together we will continue to work hard to promote video game soundtracks here in America, as well as giving our listeners the quality and quantity of music they have come to expect from us. As for specific future plans, we have a lot of very exciting things in the works, you'll just have to stay tuned to find out what they are!

What should the people know about GFM?
Gaming FM broadcasts via SHOUTcast, the Internet's largest broadcasting network. Our Complete Selection station alone is currently ranked #100 out of 5000 stations on the SHOUTcast network. We stream our soundtracks 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, and because we're internet-based, Gaming FM reaches a worldwide audience of thousands. Visit us now at http://www.gamingfm.com/

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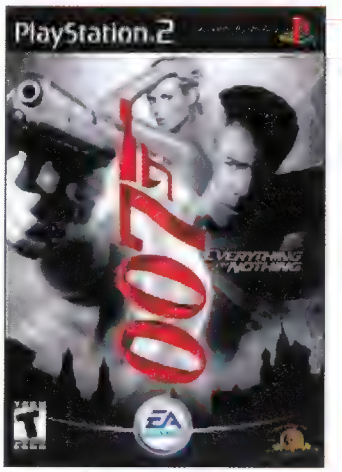
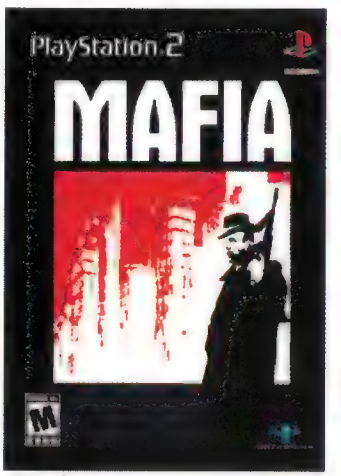
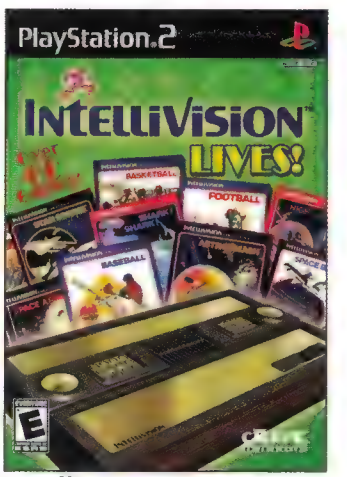


Bond 007: Everything or Nothing
Available 2/11

Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles
Available 2/11



Mafia
Available 1/28



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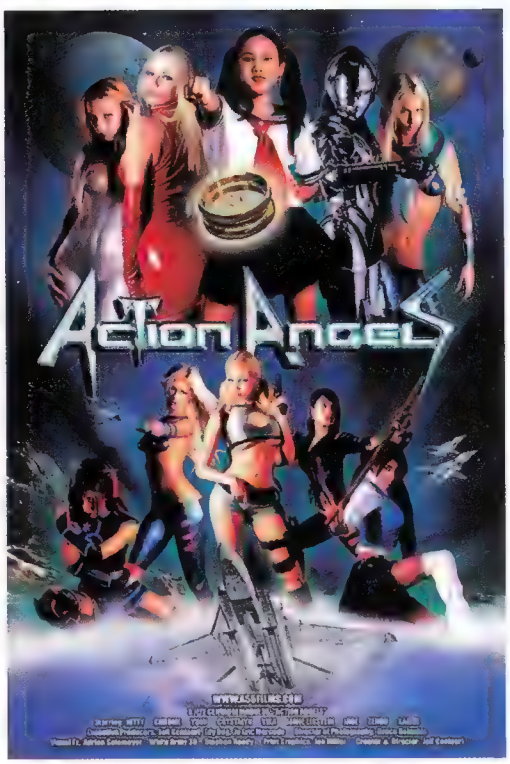
Zelda Still Linking Up

If you've been wondering about Nintendo's multiplayer GameCube Zelda games shown back at E3 2003—arguably the most exciting prospect of their commitment to GameCube-to-GBA connectivity—wonder no more. Nintendo has revealed that in Japan, these GameCube games will be bundled together in a multiplayer Zelda set called The Legend of Zelda: Four Swords Plus, featuring the two titles previously shown, Zelda Adventure (similar to the GBA Four Swords game) and Navi's Trackers (formerly Tetra's Trackers, where players race to certain points on the map using a voice navigation system), plus a third new combat-oriented game, Shadow Battle. In its new guise, Four Swords Plus features extensive single-player modes and ironically no longer requires GBAs for players to participate, thus opening the doors even wider for multiplayer fun. No announcement has been made for a U.S. release yet, but the Japanese will be getting the game in February.

Gaming's Angels

They're cool, they're sexy, they're cute and they kick major butt! Are you ready for video game girls come to life and kicking butt on DVD? A55 Films' Action Angels are just that and coming your way from the green screen direct to DVD this spring. They are: Kitty—a ninja girl with amazing fighting skills seeking to learn a mysterious technique called Kyosentai, known only by a man known as Kaizer who will unleash his deadliest warriors against her; Chrome—a cybernetic female warrior who wields a powerful plasma blade and dreams to be back in her human form; Yumi—cute and perky, possessing an alien weapon that looks like a yo-yo, which many bad people are trying to get their hands on; Crystalyn—who has the ability to manipulate the atomic structure of the air around her and turn it into deadly shards of destruction; Vixa—a bad girl in red latex, aiming to destroy all those who conform to the new justice system; and Jamie Einstein—secret great granddaughter of Albert Einstein, with her high intelligence and supreme physical abilities. See more at www.A55films.com



Nintendo UK reveals...

Nintendo of Europe recently issued a press release touting its strong first-quarter 2004 line-up, and among all the previously announced games and titles already available in the U.S., two Game Boy Advance sequel announcements stood out to generate excitement among the Nintendo faithful: F-Zero 2 and Donkey Kong Country 2. Recently released in Japan, F-Zero 2 (known there as F-Zero: Falcon Densetsu—it's tied into the anime) offers anime-style cutscenes and 30 playable racers, each with a unique storyline that interconnects with that of the other racers throughout your rise through the circuit. Given the lackluster retail showing of the GameCube F-Zero GX, Falcon Densetsu's future was in question outside of Japan, but the European announcement gives renewed hope that the game will make it to North America. Donkey Kong Country 2 is, of course, a port of the SNES classic of the same name and a follow-up to last year's GBA remake. This version of the Rare classic will feature the return of DKC's dancing and fishing minigames (to be played solo or linked up), as well as the DK Attack mode, which challenges you to beat each level in record time.

Red Undead Revolver

Given that "Dead" is its middle name, it's ironic that this is one game that just refuses to go away. Western-themed shooter Red Dead Revolver, previously believed cancelled, is still coming to consoles near you, now from the smoking barrel of Rockstar Games.

"We are excited to announce this astounding new franchise which portrays one of the most fascinating periods of time in American history," said Sam Houser, president of Rockstar Games, in a press statement. "Red Dead Revolver is Rockstar Games' first foray into the wild west and the Rockstar production team is eager to deliver an engaging and visually stunning experience that pays homage to this era."

With further development handled by Rockstar San Diego, Red Dead Revolver is scheduled for a spring release on both PlayStation 2 and Xbox. It shouldn't be long before gamers will learn if Rockstar was wise in their acquisition…or if Capcom was wise to get rid of it.

Chinese Democracy

So, you've spent hours and hours building up a character in EverQuest and stocked yourself with only the rarest of weaponry. At the end of the day, does all that work have any real-world value? According to a ruling in Beijing court, the answer is "yes."

The case started in February 2003 when 24-year-old gamer Li Hongchen discovered that his account in the popular Chinese MMO game Hongyue (or Red Moon) had been hacked. As a result, his stockpile of weapons used in the game was stolen. Li informed the makers of the game, Beijing Arctic Ice Technology Development Co. Ltd., and asked for his equipment to be returned to his account. When the company declined, Li took his case to court, demanding the return of his virtual property as well as 10,000 yuan (roughly $1200 US) in damages...and guess what? He won!

Arctic Ice argued that since the property in question only existed within the confines of the game, the items in question could not be assigned any actual value; no more than data bits stored on their servers. Li contended that since he had spent two years playing the game, investing time and money in the effort, the theft of his virtual items was no different than the theft of any real-world item, claiming that Arctic Ice was negligent in the safeguarding of this property and therefore should be held accountable.

In the end, the court sided with Li when it handed down its decision in mid-December blaming security holes in the game's servers for the theft. Put that in your virtual pipe and smoke it! Welcome to the court of virtual reality.

The first rule of Fight Club: Don't make a bad game about Fight Club

It's been more than four years since the brutal movie hit, but that's not stopping VU Games from bringing Fight Club to PlayStation 2 and Xbox late this year. Not surprisingly, the game will be a one-on-one fighter, and will ground itself heavily in realistic combat and in elements of the film, using the characters, story elements and visual style of the movie to support to action.

"Fight Club is set to deliver a fighting game that will portray the experience of a realistic fighter that incorporates many elements from the Fight Club movie," said VU Games' North American president Luc Vanhal in a press release. "Genuine Games has stepped up to the plate to develop a fighting game that will capture the raw intensity of street fighting that will appeal to movie fans, hardcore fighting game fans and casual gamers alike."

Genuine Games is a studio founded in 2002, with team members' previous works including Knockout Kings and Ratchet & Clank.

Hunt and Capture Prehistorical beasts!

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"Catch some really big game like Dinosaur Hunting on Xbox next month"
-- **1UP.COM**

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-- **Offical Xbox Magazine**

XBOX

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Mild language
Violence

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	Virgin Megastore Top Ten
01	**Mafia** *gathering of developers / xb, ps2*
02	**Max Payne 2** *rockstar / xb, ps2*
03	**NFL Street** *ea / xbox, gc, ps2*
04	**Final Fantasy X-2** *square enix / ps2*
05	**The Sims: Bustin' Out** *ea / xb, gc, ps2, gba*
06	**Manhunt** *rockstar / ps2*
07	**Medal of Honor: Rising Sun** *ea / xb, gc, ps2*
08	**Mario Kart: Double Dash!!** *nintendo / gc*
09	**True Crime: Streets of LA** *activision / xb, gc, ps2*
10	**GTA Double Pack** *rockstar / ps2, xb*

	NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Nov. Game Sales
01	**Mario Kart: Double Dash!!** *nintendo / gc*
02	**Medal of Honor: Rising Sun** *ea / ps2*
03	**Final Fantasy X-2** *square enix / ps2*
04	**Grand Theft Auto Double Pack** *rockstar / xb*
05	**Need for Speed Underground** *ea / ps2*
06	**SOCOM II: U.S. Navy SEALS** *sony / ps2*
07	**Tony Hawk's Underground** *activision / ps2*
08	**True Crime: Streets of LA** *activision / ps2*
09	**Super Mario Advance 4: SMB3** *nintendo / gba*
10	**Madden NFL 2004** *ea / ps2*

your megastore beckons!

NFL Street
ea / xbox, gc, ps2

Applying the same urban veneer that catapulted NBA Street into the limelight to football, EA's got another mega-hit franchise on their hands.

Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles
nintendo / gc

And this, ladies and gentlemen, is why we play games. If you like epic mesmerizing fantasy, this is nirvana.

007: Everything or Nothing
ea / xbox, gc, ps2

Quite possibly the most ambitious and best movie game ever, because it's all original—built from the ground up for your console satisfaction.

staff and reader selections

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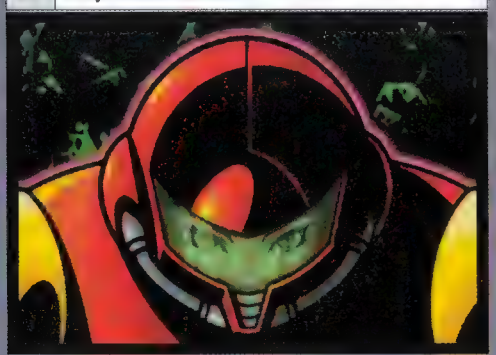
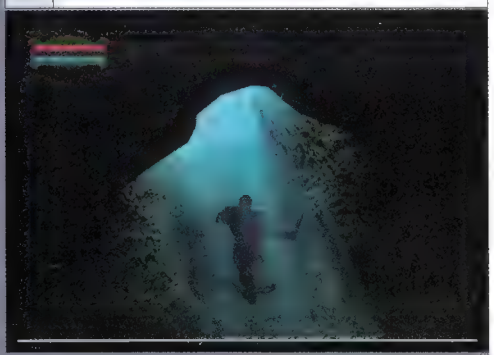
	Readers' Most Wanted databaseeplaymagazine.com
01	**Metroid Prime 2** *nintendo / gc*
02	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** *konami / ps2*
03	**Final Fantasy XII** *square enix / ps2*
04	**Gran Turismo 4** *sony / ps2*
05	**Ninja Gaiden** *tecmo / xb*



	Dave Halverson editor in chief
01	**Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles** *nintendo / gc*
02	**Breakdown** *namco / xb*
03	**Sonic Heroes** *sega / gc*
04	**007: Everything or Nothing** *ea / ps2*
05	**Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time** *ubisoft / xb*

	Brady Fiechter executive editor
01	**Champions of Norrath** *sony / ps2*
02	**Jak II** *sony / ps2*
03	**LOTR: The Return of the King** *ea / xb*
04	**Culdcept** *nec / ps2*
05	**AirForce Delta Strike** *konami / ps2*



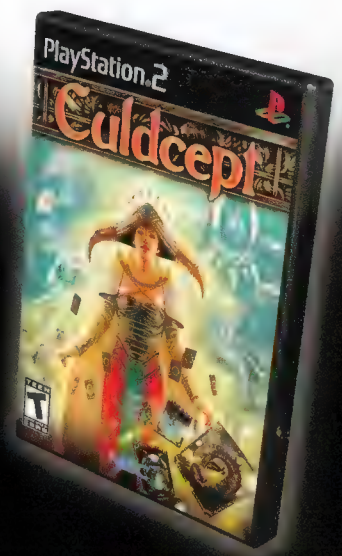
	Chris Hoffman some editor
01	**Metroid: Zero Mission** *nintendo / gba*
02	**Final Fantasy X-2** *square enix / ps2*
03	**Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg** *sega / gc*
04	**Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time** *ubisoft / xb*
05	**Viewtiful Joe** *capcom / gc*

	Michael Hobbs art director
01	**Final Fantasy XI** *square enix / pc*
02	**Project Gotham Racing 2** *microsoft / xb*
03	**Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga** *nintendo / gba*
04	**R: Racing Evolution** *namco / xb*
05	**Rez (import)** *sega / ps2*

	Nelson Lui associate art director
01	**Call Of Duty** *activision / pc*
02	**Final Fantasy Tactics Advance** *nintendo / gba*
03	**Legend of Zelda: Collector's Edition** *nintendo / gc*
04	**Final Fantasy X-2** *square enix / ps2*
05	**Mario Kart: Double Dash!!** *nintendo / gc*

NOTE TO SELF:

WATER FAIRY MAKES LOUSY DEFENSE AGAINST GIANT PYRO DRAGON!



Culdcept... The magical card-based, land acquisition video game that has swept Japan and now has its sights set on the USA.

PlayStation®2

GameSpy 2003 GAME OF THE YEAR PS2 TOP 10

TEEN T Fantasy Violence Partial Nudity

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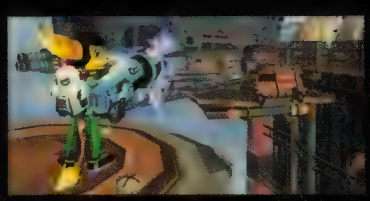
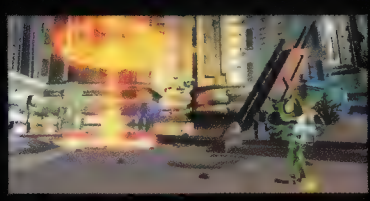
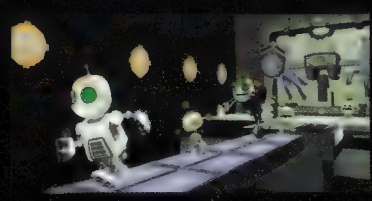
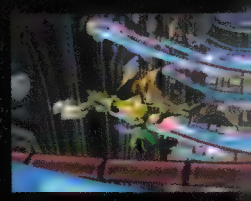


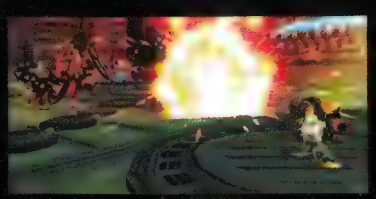






EENIE, MEENIE, MINEY, BOOM.

They're back. And they're itching for action. With tons of planets to conquer in a whole new gigantic galaxy, you better believe Ratchet & Clank are gonna sink their teeth into some destruction. Ummm, destruction. With weapon upgrades, mods, armor and the ability for Ratchet to get stronger and smarter as the game goes on, this could get uglier than The Grandmas In Bikinis Calendar after-party. Speaking of parties, there's also hoverbike racing, space combat and gladiator arenas. As far as weapons and gadgets go, Ratchet & Clank are stacked with over 50 new ones, along with unlockable upgrades, so by the end of the journey, you'll go through more weapons and gadgets than a hungry fat man will go through chicken wings at lunch. Lock and load, baby, lock and load. **www.us.playstation.com**



Ratchet & Clank

Going Commando

LIVE IN YOUR WORLD.
PLAY IN OURS.

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mild Violence

PlayStation.2

INSOMNIAC GAMES

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StarCraft Ghost

[illegible] fans have enjoyed
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[illegible] editions more will
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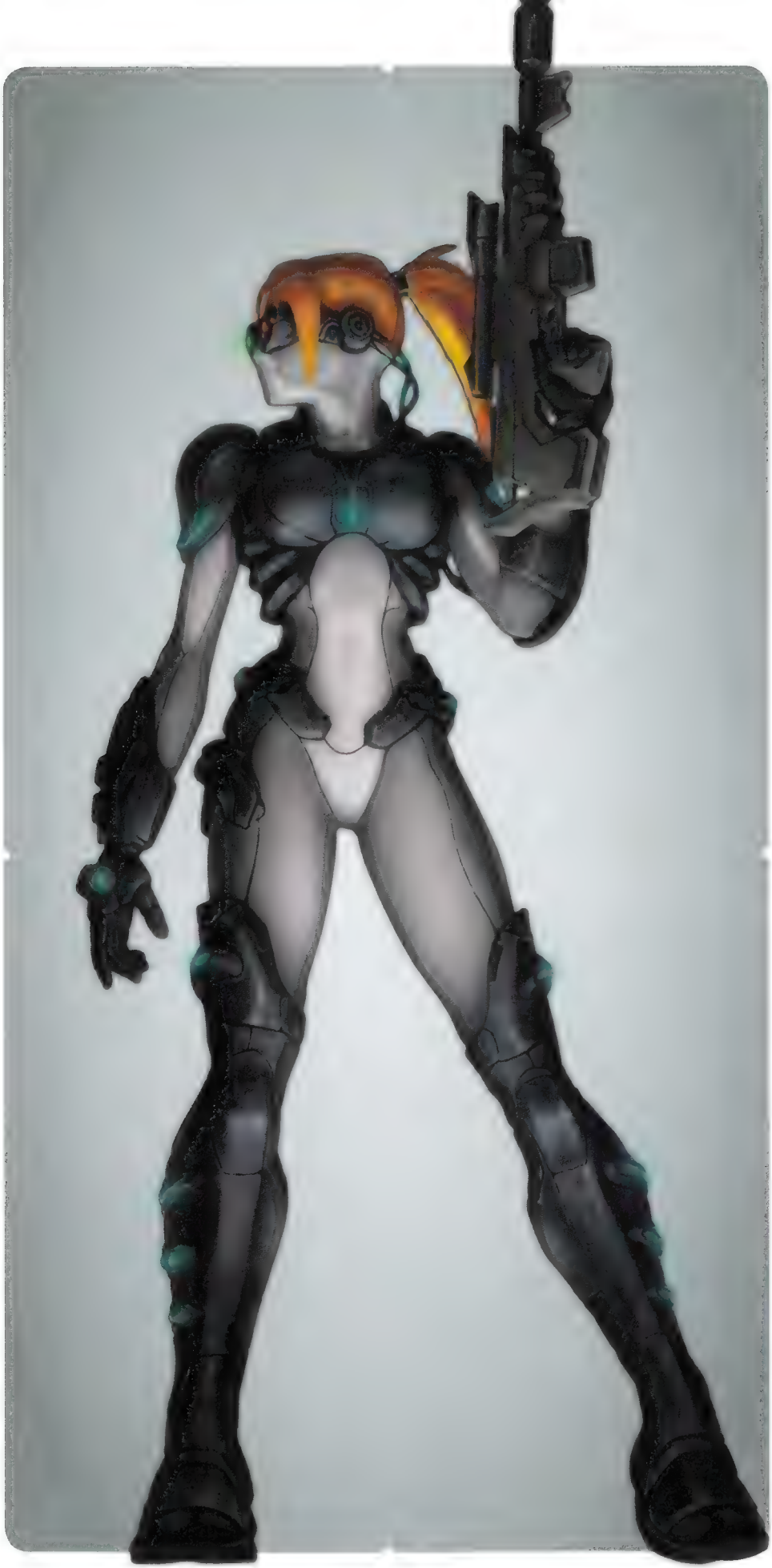


Having seen parts of StarCraft: Ghost that, up to this point, only its makers have laid eyes on, having filled four hours worth of tape while discussing its virtues with the producer, having been thrilled by awesome things I've never quite seen in a game before...what I most wanted to know was: so when will we finally get to play StarCraft: Ghost? "It'll be done when it's done," says John Lagrave, the game's enthusiastic producer. And he means it, delivering his words with a confident look of promise that the forthcoming game will practically redefine the fledgling action-stealth genre.

When you're a highly respected, highly successful company like Blizzard, garnering endless praise with achievements like Warcraft, StarCraft and Diablo, you're afforded a luxury most developers can only dream of. Production cycles in this industry are often tightly controlled and not necessarily that friendly to their toiling makers. "Nothing goes out the door here at Blizzard until it's completely ready and we're happy with the results," says Lagrave. Happy is what you'll be when StarCraft: Ghost does finally premiere on Xbox, GameCube and PlayStation 2 this year. Blown away is what you'll be if the game continues on its steady course.

It all begins with a simple design-doc pitch, succinctly stating: StarCraft: Ghost, based on a Terran unit from the real-time strategy game StarCraft (1998) and its expansion set StarCraft: Brood War (1999). If that says zero to you, no worries: "You don't need to know shit [about StarCraft]," says Lagrave. "We're making this for a console audience. We're certainly hoping we'll get our PC group to enjoy the game. But there are millions of consoles players who have never played a Blizzard game... We're basically drawing from our really rich world and moving forward. If you are aware of all the stuff, if you're a StarCraft nut, you'll be recognizing some of the same cool places."

While StarCraft was a pure real-time strategy game with Ghost, Blizzard is building off a completely new

"You are basically the best unit of the Terrans, so you can definitely kick some ass."

foundation of play, drawing on a mix of all sorts of gameplay components. "It falls in the action-adventure category," states Lagrave. "You're gonna start out being a lot less stealthy. You start out dealing with the Zerg, which is the bug-like race. Then you get into the Terran and Protoss race. We're basically training you in stealth. You can be aggressive with the Zerg and get away with it. But you find out when you're dealing with the Terrans that you want to be a lot more stealthy: they've got a lot more detection ability and they're better at dealing with you as a Ghost. You are basically the best unit of the Terrans, so you can definitely kick some ass. But get to the Protoss—you have to be careful, you have to be stealthy. They're gonna respond in force, teleporting units in. In other words, they don't f**k around."

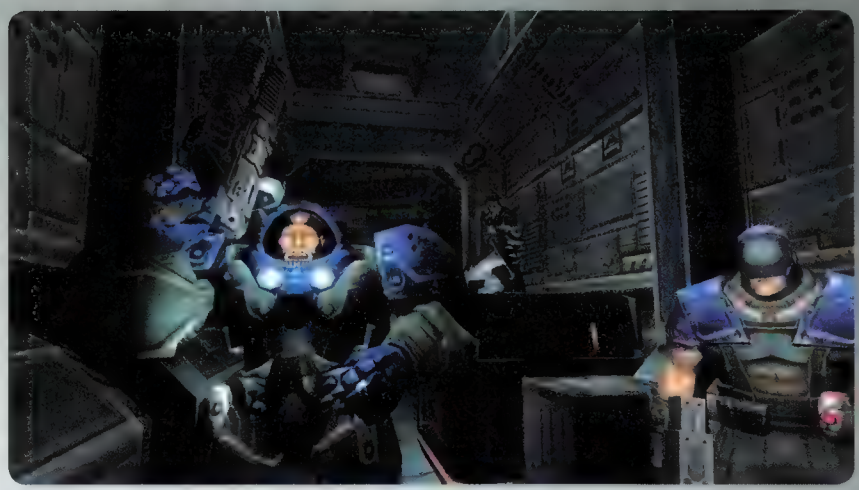
The "Ghost" Lagrave refers to is our steely, gorgeously modeled star, Nova, from the Terran Ghost unit—a harshly conditioned group of special ops soldiers trained in the arts of espionage and tactical combat. "Turns out you're really crème de la crème. You're top of your class, recruited personally by this guy Colonel Jackson Hauler as part of his corps," explains Lagrave. "He's gonna try you out, see how you do, see how good your are. He'll give you a bunch of missions and evaluate you. He's your boss. He'll be giving you gameplay objectives throughout."

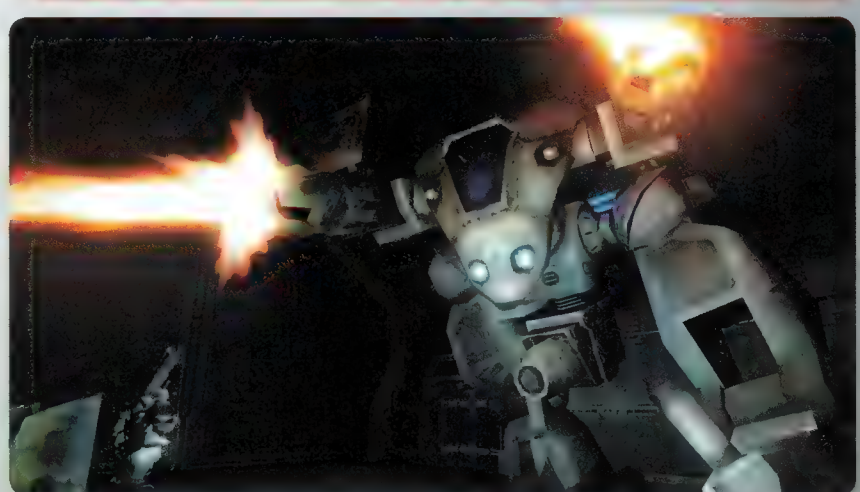
In StarCraft: Ghost, the general idea is kill or be killed. Meeting this objective requires a mastery of a number of skill sets. And what more familiar way to start than with ample firepower? "Nova's got basically three guns. Going into gun mode, which is a simple press of the Y key, brings up her Gauss rifle, a machine gun; it's got an ammo count at the bottom to let you know you've selected it. You've also got a small combat pistol. It's an energy-based weapon, with different utility uses. Allows you to interact with the world fairly well: shoot wires, blow up barrels, shoot cameras, drain psi shields on Protogs. It's a great fallback weapon that gets you all over the place." And then we have our sniper rifle, your best friend and finest instrument of death. Keeping quiet, killing from afar and from the safety of the shadows, is the best approach to smartly efficient passage through a hostile area. Its engaging versatility is a big part of the fun. capping someone while you hang from an overhead wire is a rush.

Some of the enemies in Ghost are merely intimidating. Some are so imposing your initial reaction is to panic and run. For an instant kill, every enemy has a sweet spot; all you have to do is find it. Take the Space Marine. "Yeah, he's just a badass," agrees Lagrave. "He's sort of like the guys in *Starship Troopers*, the notion of a very powerful, heavily armored tactical unit. He's got tremendous firepower, and he's just huge, with big, bulky armor. He can go toe to toe, take a lot of damage. But if you can get the drop on him, if his visor is up, you can take him in one shot."

Finding an enemy's weakness often comes down to relying on your cool Sight ability, which reveals heat signatures from passing foes and indicates vulnerable openings in machinery and other environmental strong holds. Footprints leave a trail too, so you can trace the path of your resistance and better position yourself for a safe kill.

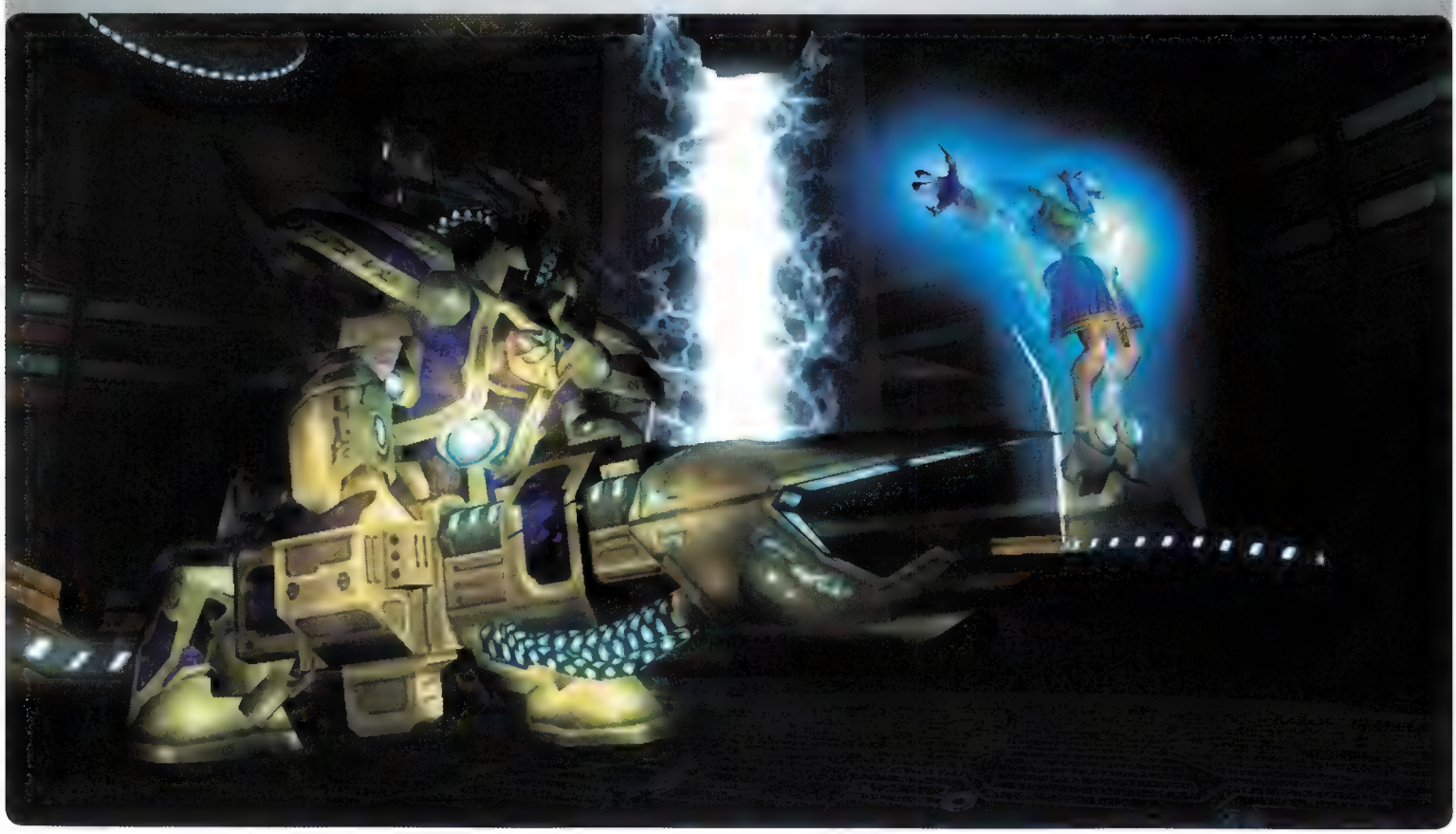
In addition to Sight, Nova learns the ability to slow everything down around her while she stays normally active with Speed. Cloaking is the third and perhaps most valuable special power. "It needs to be fun, but it also needs to be reasonable," explains Lagrave. "Cloaking could be utterly powerful. I could just go the whole way through the game cloaked if I managed the resource well. How challenging can that be? Well, we build things into the world that deal with cloaking. We want to create a sci-fi world that's intelligent. An intelligent world would say, 'Ok, we're gonna build in detectors that will spot a cloaked being.' A perfect example of that: a camera spots you cloaked, you get a nice indication that your cloaking's being disrupted on the unit itself. An





"We want to create a sci-fi world that's intelligent. An intelligent world would say, 'Ok, we're gonna build in detectors that will spot a cloaked being.'"

John Lagrave, **producer**



automatic defense pops up, guns you down, that kind of stuff."

When you think about it, does it make sense that you'd be the only one to have this devious technology while the enemy wanders around helplessly? Blizzard is definitely paying good attention to fusing appropriate details into its world. "The thing about cloaking is that everyone in the universe is aware of it. The Terrans build the stuff. Everyone has detectors," Lagrave points out. "For the humans, we have a bunch of different ones. We have these stationary units, we have roving units that are mini-psi vessel drones. For the Zerg, there are overloads that are able to move everywhere and see what's going on. Units like the Observers can detect cloak."

Utilizing these powers drains Nova's psi, a sort of psychic energy that regenerates over time. Psi pretty much drives the world's technology. "All the races are after it, trying to use it in some way," says Lagrave. "The Zerg feed off it, the Protoss manipulate it to run their buildings."

When a situation gets out of hand or an impenetrable area needs penetrating, it's time to resort to the mass destruction of the call-downs. "It's a resource you're gonna get from your commander who will be notified at points that certain spaceships are available. You're essentially getting on the horn and saying, 'Hey, I need a Yamato cannon, or I can't move forward. So basically you'll see these cutscenes with these ships moving in and getting into position. It's pretty unique, one of the things that sets us off from the rest."

The effect of calling in a nuclear strike or spreading a biological agent are obvious and sweeping, but when you're indoors or risk skinning your own hide, a grenade or cleverly placed mine is always a lovely alternative. Spider mines, for example, burrow into the ground, and when an enemy passes over it, it comes out and detonates. Or you can simply drive it over to something and set it off. The Mantis is another sneaky device, sending out a "ping" to distract the enemy or lead them to specific spot.

Nova's obviously got the explosive firepower to fend off an army, but occasionally her hands are her weapon. "We have a silent-kill ability in the game," Lagrave points out. "If you get the drop on somebody, you can sneak up behind them, hit a trigger, and take them out... How over-the-top is our silent kill? We're looking at the animation, trying to evaluate...is that really going to be too much? We're not doing a Kill Bill. We're constantly looking at it; we definitely have the guys saying, 'Look, this is the coolest thing ever! She's gonna split his head open and take it off from the neck!' But that's not the game we're making."

It's not always necessary, but more often than not you'll be finding yourself going for sweeping kills. Leaving the evidence isn't so wise. "AI responds to dead bodies," explains Lagrave. "They're gonna sit there and ask, 'Why is this guy dead?'"

So it's time to eliminate the evidence: drop a body off a ledge, pull it into a corner out of sight. But before you do, search the body for valuables like psi, health and ammunition—resource management definitely counts. Sometimes you want to get the body out of the way simply to clear a path. Doing so is, if for nothing less, simple interactive fun; one thing that really impressed me was the look and feel of a body as Nova sweats to toss around the giant units.

In a game like this, AI can be tricky to implement and isn't always reactionary enough. Blizzard's on it: "See how he actually lowered his head down?" Lagrave asks as I attempt to unload a basic round on an opponent's face. "He's protecting himself, the bullets are just flying off him. There are also cover nodes in the game, so the AI will run for protection. If they can't find you, they'll know where to go. If they're taking damage, they'll find cover. All the races act differently."

Okay then, these guys aren't meant to fall easily—unless they're being crushed under the treads of a tank. Nova's a well-trained lady, fully capable of operating heavy equipment like the Goliath Combat Walker and Arclite Siege Tank. "When you're out on the open battlefield, you can go into Siege Tank mode, and just blow the crap out of everything," Lagrave delightfully points out. "We're giving you this intense action element towards the end of the game. You've done a lot of stealth, we know you're tired of it. You want a little break; it's fun to kick some ass. So we give you a tank to go through and just rain down hell."

Now, when we crush, say, those poor little Zerglings, they're gonna scream, right? The tank is gonna sound menacing, right?

"Oh yeah!" exclaims Lagrave. "I was a big fan of *Saving Private Ryan*. One of the awesome parts of that movie was the sounds. The squeal of those tank treads at the end battle was awesome. I was like, 'We're doing that for our game!'"

And like an assaulting action film, StarCraft: Ghost wants to pack a powerful punch. "One of the things we're really focusing on is visceral combat. The notion that you gotta feel good about kicking ass. That it feels like you've really accomplished something when you take out this guy. He's tough as f**king nails."

Many of you will certainly argue that a game just isn't a game without the extra charge of big, bad boss fights. Blizzard's on that too: "Boss fights will be occurring sporadically throughout the various episodes," explains Lagrave. "Boss fights are sort of traditional, sort of untraditional. Some of it will be about manipulating environments, some of it involves doing direct damage. In the end, we want to make the boss fights a little different than normal. We didn't really want to do the 50 rockets in the gut thing; it's been done. We want the player to be a little more intelligent with their approach. Some of it will definitely involve direct damage, and we've got vehicles involved as well. The confrontations will be scattered sporadically, giving you a break from the stealth."

One of the first areas you'll explore in StarCraft: Ghost is an ominous oil refinery, which has been recently attacked by the Zerg. You'll infiltrate a research facility called Vyctor 5, which is surrounded by a giant gas cloud that resembles the red eye on Jupiter. Indoor and outdoor, through wastelands and industrial areas, deep inside factories and military bases—this is the world of Ghost, compelling even as a scattered work in progress.

Also under construction is the story. "It's a Blizzard game, so we've got backstabbing, multiple layers of deceit. We actually just started cleaning the story up a bit. We said to ourselves, 'Nobody's gonna get this stuff!' But we have a very involved story, a pretty moral tale. It's very much about personal growth, about how this young woman, this unit, becomes a better person. You begin doing a lot of killing, but you start to discover you're being manipulated."

Given that StarCraft: Ghost is Blizzard's first console game in a long while and quite the departure from what they've explored on PC, an obvious question arises: was it a unique challenge? "Yeah, there's that challenge of going into something we've never done before," begins Lagrave. "That said, we're a bunch of gaming geeks: we play everything. We love playing everything. We're on console all the time, playing action-adventure all the time. We love games. So it's a matter of, sure, it's different, but we like to think we know games. In the end, it's all about the quality of design." **Brady Fiechter**

[redacted] **Xbox, GameCube, PlayStation 2**
[redacted] **Nihilistic Software/Blizzard**
[redacted] **Blizzard**
[redacted] **2004**

Here's a little rundown Blizzard provided on what you'll be fighting and where the killing's gonna take place:

[redacted]es Nova Will Face (revealed so far):

[redacted]*errar* – Light Infantry (highly mobile military units), Marines (heavily armored military units with huge firepower; they lower their face shields when they sense danger), Firebats (heavily armored flamethrowing units), Ghosts (like Nova), Mechanics (somewhat helpless), Surveillance Cameras and Mounted Guns

[redacted]*g* – Hyralisks (massive, spine-shooting creatures with scythe-like claws and bullet-resistant carapaces, which they intelligently use to protect themselves), Mutalisks (powerful flying creatures that shoot a barrage of poisonous toxins), Zerglings (tiny, doglike creatures that overwhelm their enemies in swarms), Overlords (massive airborne creatures that detect hidden units, transport Zerglings and coordinate Zerg attacks)

[redacted] – Zealots (powerful and agile fighters with psi blades on each arm; they activate personal shielding when they sense danger), Purifiers (they wield massive medium-range psi cannons, which can hurt Nova; like Zealots, they also activate personal shielding when they sense danger), Light Dragoons (spider-like mechanical units, each of which contains the life force of a fallen Protoss; they fire powerful energy bolts at ground and air units), Observers (stealth-detecting surveillance craft that can cloak), Photon Cannons (stationary energy cannons), Pylons (energy sources for Photon Cannons)

[redacted]Areas Nova Will Visit/Infiltrate (revealed so far

Mar Sara – A red, dusty, war-ravaged planet. It holds a Terran planetary outpost—which is being overrun by the Zerg when Nova arrives.
Pinnacle Station – A Terran research base located in the center of the Fujita Pinnacle, a storm vortex on a Jupiter-like desert planet called Vyctor 5.
Aiur – The lush homeworld of the Protoss...regrowth has occurred in the area of the Gantrithoss Crater—a landmark from the RTS game—and many of the Protoss buildings remain...vine-ridden but intact. Waterfalls fall into the crater, and the entire place exudes a sacred quality.
Char – The homeworld of the Zerg—a rocky, volcanic planet that holds large hidden networks of creep-covered Zerg hives.

Nightshade

Shinobi girl

"Who is this mysterious new girl? I must find her and show her my katana."

"Nightshade definitely takes me back, feeling way more old-school Sega than Shinobi did."

Sega's latest dip into the Shinobi pond is one easily summarized: if you liked Shinobi, you'll love Sega's first spin-off, Nightshade. Overworks, or Sega Wow as they now call it, must have gone directly back to the drawing board after Shinobi, feedback in hand, because Nightshade offers more of everything that shined in that game, few of the annoyances and more of what made the series great in the first place.

The most profound change is, of course, the first-ever female Shinobi: Hibane, a nimble, leggy, sexy government operative out to recover shards of Akujiki, the soul-consuming sacred sword that's still raising hell all over Tokyo. Scrumptious to see and feel, she ranks among Sega's best characters like Astal, Orta and Kelly O'Lemney—a better mainstay in the series' evolution, given the popularity of girls in gaming, for sure.

Fans may be a smidgeon disheartened to learn that the second go 'round is sans a graphic overhaul, but what the game lacks in visual punch it more than makes up for in the gameplay, which is faster and more fluid then ever. Not that Nightshade doesn't look good...it's a slick presentation, rich with elegant Japanese characters and monsters. It's just built for speed over heavy textures, organics or signage. Either way you slice it, be sure to bring your 3D sixth sense; Tate combos (wounding consecutive opponents in the allotted time for a cinematic spooge fest) are once again the core of the fighting and the key to boss disposal. Speaking of which, Nightshade's are suitably enhanced, with an emphasis on huge. It's the action elsewhere, however, that's received the most attention, and if there's one reason to indulge in Nightshade, this is it. When we spoke to the producers back in '02, we couldn't shut up about Revenge of Shinobi, and apparently neither could anyone else. Not only is there more jumping and vertical play in Nightshade, but true to the Shinobis of old, both highway and boating stages are generously included, along with more monsters and less Power Rangers in ninja suits. The music is also a throwback. I don't know if they found Yuzo Koshiro or just found a way to channel his brand of techno magic, but the music has a heavy Revenge of Shinobi/Streets of Rage vibe; in other words, it's completely intoxicating.

Nightshade definitely takes me back, feeling way more old-school Sega than Shinobi did. I'm hoping Hibane's voice isn't final, seeing as how she speaks somewhat out of character (and with all the emotion of a dead fish), but knowing Sega... With any luck, Japanese with English subtitles will be offered. **Dave Halverson**

System: Playstation 2
Developer: Sega Wow
Publisher: Sega
Available: February

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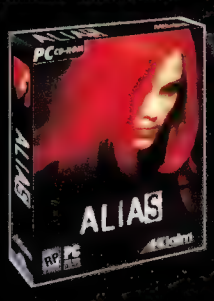

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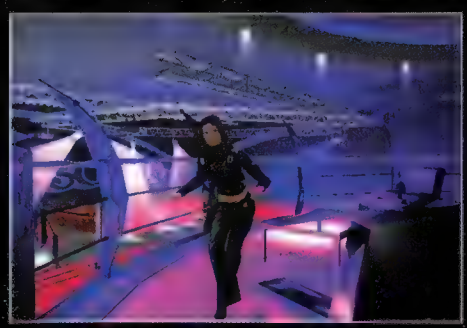

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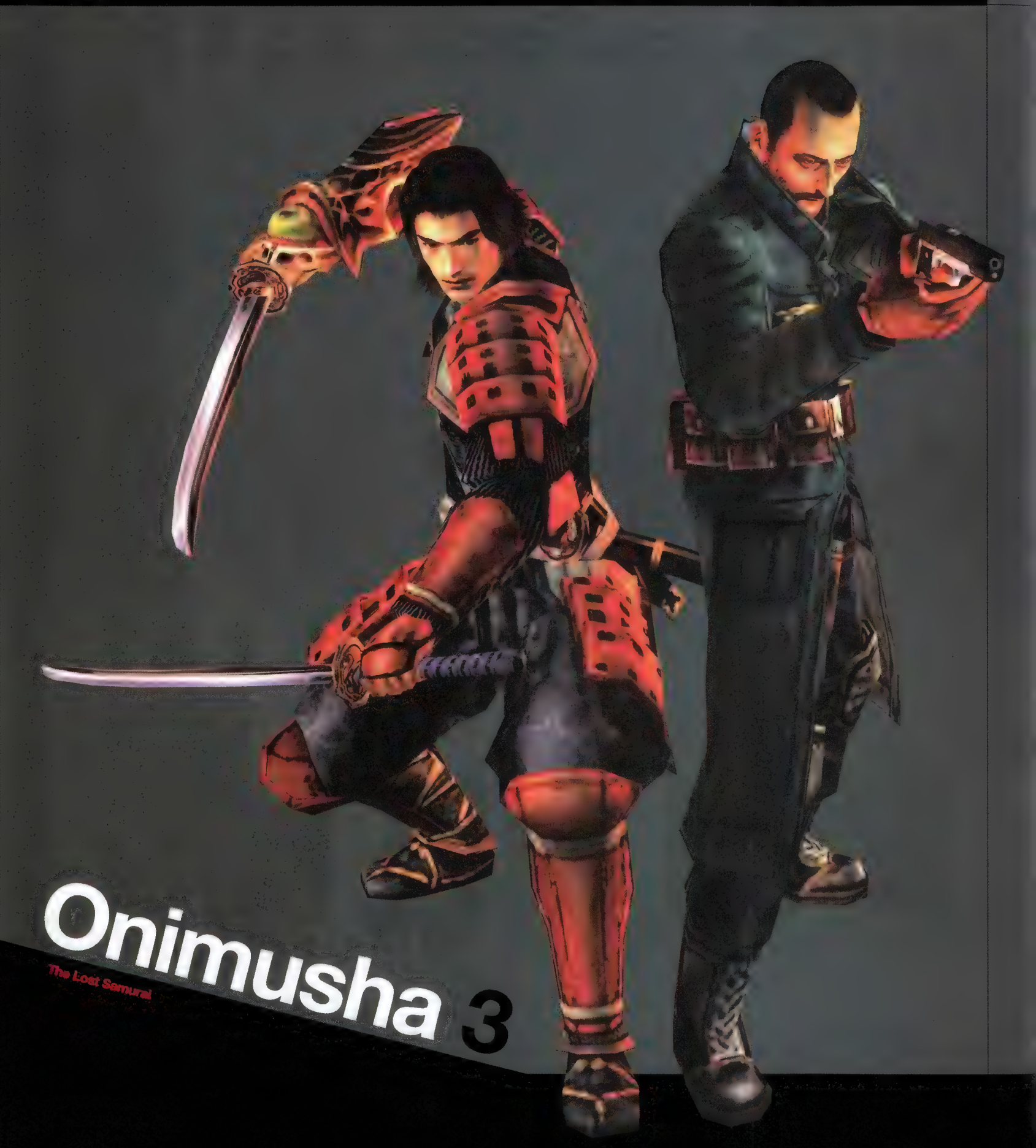


Onimusha 3

The Lost Samurai

A masked ninja-like warrior wages a lone battle against the demonic Genma army of Oda Nobunaga. The combat is fast and unbelievably fluid as the warrior assaults an armada of repulsive organic battleships and tanks. He nimbly makes his way to the main battleship—actually a massive, insect-like creature—using his lightning-quick agility and prowess with a blade to make short work of his adversaries. The warrior is unmasked in the chaos—he is none other than Samanosuke Akechi, the hero of Onimusha: Warlords. The action is beyond the telling of it. Donnie Yen's (*Shanghai Knights*) choreography is amazing. The fight comes to a head when a towering demon named Goroganto, Nobunaga's guardian, emerges from the ship's glowing green control chamber. The battle is intense; victory is not assured until Samanosuke destroys the creature/ship by crushing its brain core. The resulting devastation virtually wipes out the enemy battle fleet, allowing Samanosuke to suck up his enemies' souls, transforming himself into a demonic form. He unleashes all his power, apparently obliterating Goroganto...then walks away, ready to confront Nobunaga for a final encounter.

So begins Onimusha 3, with one of the most impressive and complex CG sequences ever seen in a game, setting the stage for the series' most ambitious—and most likely final—entry. Onimusha is moving forward in brave new directions, guided by two seemingly disparate forces: the desire of series creator/producer Keiji Inafune to make the ultimate Onimusha game, and, perhaps more so, his desire to appeal to the biggest audience possible, taking varying worldwide tastes into account.

"With [Onimusha] 3, we've pretty much been able to put everything we wanted to into the game and take our time and really realize the Onimusha that we've wanted to," says Inafune. "We were able to achieve our dreams of what the Onimusha world should truly be."

When the gameplay begins, Samanosuke (still modeled after Japanese actor Takeshi Kaneshiro) is only a few screens away from confronting Nobunaga himself. As the climactic battle unfolds, however, a rift appears in the fabric of time and space, warping Samanosuke out of feudal Japan and into, of all places, modern-day Paris. But this is not Paris as we know it. Nobunaga has grown even more ambitious; why conquer one era when you can have them all? His Genma forces have invaded, slaying innocents in the streets, laying waste to everything that stands before them. Amidst the carnage, a French army captain named Jacques Blanc (portrayed by actor Jean Reno) enters the scene, and as he is saving a friend from danger, he too is caught in a time-space tear and is sent into the warring states period of Japan. The stage is now set: two heroes, neither belonging in time or place, both working to rid the world of the evils of Oda Nobunaga.

This dichotomy is one of the main themes of Onimusha 3 yet, at its core, the basic Onimusha gameplay remains the same—quick, fun, hack 'n' slash action. Although he's now armed with new moves, Samanosuke plays much like he did before, chopping down his foes and collecting their souls to power up himself and his weapons. Newcomer Jacques is also a master of melee combat, shredding enemies with his razor-sharp whip. Jacques, however, is slightly more adventure-oriented than his counterpart. Using his whip, he can grapple from point to point, offering up more exploration than previous Onimusha games.

"What makes this game so special," explains Inafune, "is that you have this Jacques Blanc character, Jean Reno's character, who uses the whip, which makes the game feel very different. Using the whip offers this new level of exploration, more like an adventure game. But then, you go back to Samanosuke and you've got the action game. So we were really after a game that was 50/50 action-adventure that offered the perfect amount of balance."

Aside from Jacques, at least one other new character will be playable: a female armed with guns. The main reason for these fairly significant changes, Inafune says, is that he wanted to make the game more appealing to a Western audience.

"Already, Japanese people love this series," explains Inafune. "It does really well in Japan. [Onimusha] 1 did OK in America, [part] 2 didn't do so well. So my goal for this, number 3, was to make the game appeal more to foreigners, to Westerners. In order to do that, we had to add a new character in Jean Reno that would appeal to

East meets west: Inafune hopes to broaden his audience with two distinct heroes.

"We really wanted to go for a game that could be internationally cool. Not just cool for Japan, but cool for everybody who ever played it."

Keiji Inafune - Producer

foreigners as well. We really wanted to go for a game that could be internationally cool. Not just cool for Japan, but cool for everybody who ever played it. But of course...we can't make 100 percent a game that only Americans or Europeans would appreciate; we still have to think of the Japanese fans, because they're one of the reasons the games continue to last this long. So it's all about how much [can you change the Onimusha world without destroying it and I think really we've made the best game that we could."

Inafune's reasoning for shifting the setting to Paris follows a similar line of thought—that perhaps the ancient Japanese setting of the previous Onimusha games just wasn't appealing enough to the average Western gaming consumer. "Up until now, there's been a lot of games set in New York or that have a New York backdrop," asserts Inafune. "Not as many, of course, based in Paris. And in addition to that...out of [Onimusha] 1 and 2, it's sold the least in Europe. So, seeing that as our weak point, that was the area we wanted to attack and work on sales with the most aggressively. Before the war [in Iraq], it would have been better, but it's still a location that Americans can appreciate as well. Still it's foreign, but yet it's not as foreign as, say, Japan was, feudal Japan in 1 and 2."

Another major change in Onimusha 3 comes in the form of completely real-time backgrounds. Due to the first Onimusha's initial development being on the PS1 and the short development time on Onimusha 2, full 3D backgrounds were not possible, but with O nimusha 3, a new graphics engine taking full advantage of the PlayStation 2 has been developed.

"There are very few pre-rendered background games out there now," Inafune says. "We made the obvious choice, once again we wanted to appeal to more foreigners. And in America, you're going 3D or bust, basically. It's got to be polygonal backgrounds, it's got to use the analog stick controls. If not, you're going to get slammed in the reviews as well, so we made all the appropriate changes to the game."

The switch to fully polygonal backgrounds has had other additional benefits. Although the development team had to reduce the number of polygons per character, it allowed them to improve visual effects like fire and more than double the amount of enemies on screen—jumping from eight in Onimusha 2 to 20 in Onimusha 3—yet still maintain the integrity of the characters through skilled programming techniques.

"Through the development of the three games," Inafune declares, "a lot of the technicians and a lot of the artists have gotten better at realizing the images they want to create...because these artists are getting better at adding the textures as well as working with the limited amount of polygons. Thanks to the artists' technical abilities, the game's quality has, in fact, not dropped. The reverse—it's actually got better and better."

Whether all these changes pay off and make Onimusha 3 a worldwide sensation—or just make fans wonder why there's a samurai running past the Eiffel Tower—have yet to be determined, but two things are certain: the development team is doing everything they can to make the game a hit and the series will come to a resolution with this game.

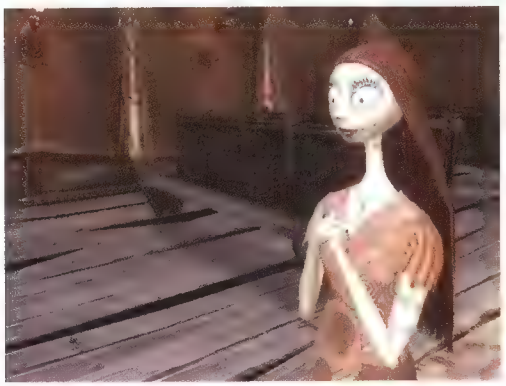
"It's always been a trilogy, and the ultimate goal has always been to take out Oda Nobunaga. I can tell you that that climactic battle will occur," proclaims Inafune. "But as to what the ending holds, whether that ending holds completion, how every player might want it to be, or perhaps unanswered mysteries or perhaps a link to another game, I can't say. You have to play through it to find out what the ending holds, but I think it's a game that is definitely worthwhile playing and actually getting that ending." **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: May

French army captain Jacques' bladed whip adds new dimensions to the Onimusha formula.

Tim Burton's

The Nightmare Before Christmas



Grabbing enemies is but one thing Jack can do with his haunting green Rubber Soul.

The 2003 holiday season has come and gone, but Capcom still has Christmas on the brain. If you missed the announcement at the last Tokyo Game Show, Capcom has received the rights to Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and they're bringing the stop-motion classic to PlayStation 2 in time for Halloween 2004.

As has been the trend with licensed games recently (well, good ones, anyway), Capcom is pulling out all the stops with Nightmare Before Christmas to make it as authentic as possible. Disney, in the form of Buena Vista Interactive, actually proposed the idea of a Nightmare game to Capcom, and this close partnership is already yielding results. Handling the art direction on the Nightmare Before Christmas game is Deane Taylor, the same man who was art director on the film, and the result is environments and characters that seem to have leapt straight from the movie, modeled and textured to perfection.

Capcom's not taking so direct an approach with the story. In fact, the game is actually a sequel to the movie, taking place one year later. Though the tale is still being shaped, Oogie Boogie is back, Sally appears to have been captured, and all the characters—including Dr. Finklestein, Lock, Shock & Barrel and, of course, main character Jack Skellington—have returned.

All this would be nothing without solid gameplay, but so far things are looking good in this department as well. Though this action-adventure is still early in development, gameplay hinges on a mechanic called the Rubber Soul—essentially a green, slime-like whip that Jack uses on his enemies and the environment. Jack can just smack his skeletal foes apart (the Soul can transform into a morning star), he can grab onto them and slam them into the ground (shades of Wild 9, for sure) or he can use it as a grappling device, transporting himself to new locations. The writhing Rubber Soul is mesmerizing with its amazingly fluid animation; to say it looks incredible is an understatement.

Producer Tetsuya Minami (known for Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts and Resident Evil Zero) has gone on record saying that he was "moved" by the *Nightmare Before Christmas* movie and that he "jumped at the chance" to turn it into a game. This love for the source material seems to be paying off; given what we've seen so far, Nightmare could be a dream come true. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom Studio 3
Publisher: Capcom
Available: October

"The writhing Rubber Soul is mesmerizing with its amazingly fluid animation..."

Cy Girls

A new breed of girl power

Ever heard of the Japanese Cy Girls toys from Takara? Me neither, but after seeing these empowered ladies strutting their cool tech stuff, you're going to want to educate yourself with their plastic counterparts.

Introducing Ice and Aska, a premier pair of crime busters out to squash the cyber-terrorism that's plaguing their slick world. In this volatile futuristic place, the population has grown to suffocating proportions, leading to the construction of a massive matrix resembling the comfort of reality. It is hoped that people will basically remove themselves from all normal ways of life and take residence in the fantasy of Cyber World, eventually deflating the pressures of a harsh existence.

The evil you're chasing exists inside and outside cyberspace, taking the adventure through exotic locations like South America and the Far East, with stints inside the virtual world changing the complexities of the action. When the girls are jacked in, weapons become absolute, forcing you to rely on acrobatic hand-to-hand combat. Super skills can also be downloaded from the controller in the real world, granting you exceptional abilities like the familiar motion-freeze technique, which slows everyone around you down to a crawl.

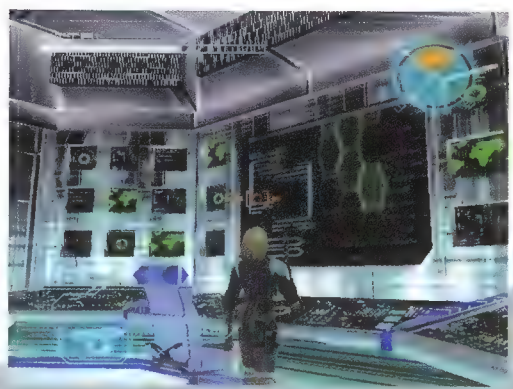
Working independently, Ice and Aska draw on varying skill sets and are driven by dramatically different personalities. Where Ice likes to use guns and other projectile weapons for the kill, Aska is the ninja, enjoying close-quarter attacks with her sword and more precise, dynamic confrontations. Both characters can scurry across walls—think Shinobi with more freedom of movement and functionality. It's a very cool technique and never gets old.

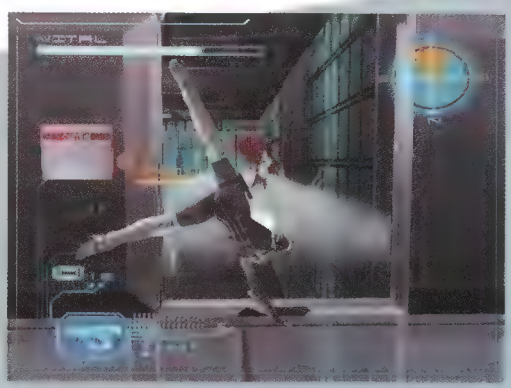
While this is a fairly straight high-octane action title, the control scheme is quite unique. You have to pay attention to the positioning of the camera, which sort of commands the character and functions as a target in itself. After catching my eye at last year's E3, finally getting a chance to dig in to the game has left this fan of action games quite excited.

Brady Fiechter

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Japan
Publisher: Konami
Available: February

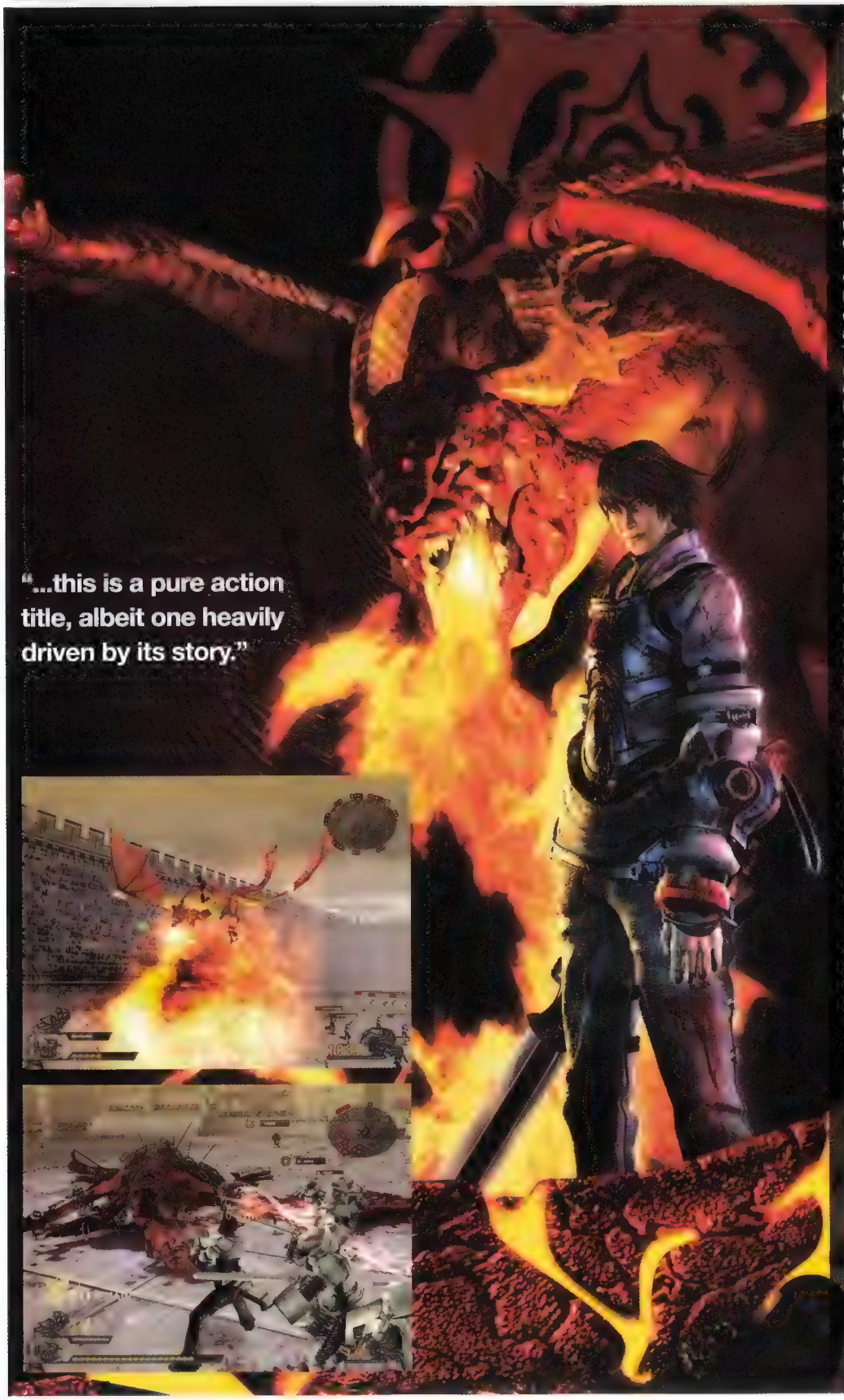
"Ice and Aska draw on varying skill sets and are driven by dramatically different personalities."





Drakengard

A human and a dragon are united...and devastation follows



"...this is a pure action title, albeit one heavily driven by its story."

Drakengard is a tale about the dark side of human emotions. Revenge, betrayal, hatred...they feed the flames of rage that power main character Caim and his pact-beast, a mighty red dragon. Though enemies by nature—Caim's prejudice stems from a black dragon that killed his parents, while the red dragon considers itself far superior to humans—the pair is eternally bound in heart and spirit. Caim, critically injured and dripping blood, and the dragon, impaled and chained to the Earth, are reborn not just because it is their sole means of survival, but so they can rain furious vengeance down upon those who harmed them so.

Players, for their part, stoke the anger that burns within the heroes by laying waste to their countless Empire foes. Don't be fooled by the Square Enix pedigree or the claims that Drakengard is an action-RPG—this is a pure action title, albeit one heavily driven by its story. This action is split between two modes of play: free-roaming, dragon-based aerial shooter stages reminiscent of Panzer Dragoon, and ground-oriented melee combat levels in the vein of recent Dynasty Warriors games.

In melee combat, making up probably two-thirds of gameplay, Caim will battle legions of enemies, where dozens of foes will appear on-screen at once; hundreds fill each stage, all awaiting Caim's bloodlust. An enormous arsenal of weapons is available, including spears, hammers, axes and various types of swords, all of which have unique magic and attack properties, and can be leveled up as they dispatch enemies. Particularly noteworthy is that in the melee stages, Caim can mount his dragon at will, incinerating foes from above that would be much tougher to defeat in close-range combat. The caveats are that he can only mount the dragon in open areas, so forests are out, and enemies like archers can knock Caim from his winged perch. Other enemies are invincible to the dragon's magical assaults.

No such troubles arise in the aerial shooter stages, where the red dragon uses a multiple-target lock-on, not so unlike that of Panzer Dragoon, to eliminate any imperial forces—be they ground-based, air-based, mechanical or organic—that stand in his way. The red dragon can even gain experience to level-up into new, more advanced forms, and build up power to unleash a magical super attack that decimates anything in the area.

Whether slaughtering the enemy on wing or foot, it all amounts to more action, more ways to increase the death toll, more ways for Drakengard to embrace you with its dark, desolate world. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Playstation 2
Developer: cavia
Publisher: Square Enix
Available: Spring

Firefighter F.D.18

system: ps2 / **developer:** kce tokyo / **publisher:** konami / **available:** march

Firefighter F.D.18 puts you in the boots of firefighter Dean McGregor, who's risking his life to save victims trapped in various urban buildings lit up by an arsonist. The game is sticking to realism as much as possible, placing backdrafts, chemical explosions and other hazards that come with the frightening territory into the infernos. Invaluable equipment includes everything from axes and picks to extinguishers, water guns and hoses. Nice to see something different for a change. -BF

007: Everything or Nothing

system: ps2, gc, xbox / **developer:** ea / **publisher:** ea / **available:** february

If you thought EA had the power after the LOTR games, wait until you get a load of Bond...EA Bond in 007: Everything or Nothing. Not based on any film in the franchise, yet stocked with stars Pierce Brosnan, Judi Dench, John Cleese, Willem Dafoe, Heidi Klum, Shannon Elizabeth, Misaki Ito, Richard Kiel and Mya, this is essentially a full Bond production tailor-made for the video game world, and if you never thought anything would beat Goldeneye, think again. This is the most impressive movie fare we've ever seen by some degree. Prepare to be truly amazed by a crossover product. -DH

MTX Mototrax

system: ps2, gc, xbox / **developer:** left field / **publisher:** activision / **available:** march

Last month we looked at MTX Mototrax this month we're playing it, and, as suspected, it's looking (and more importantly feeling) like it's going to be nearly impossible to beat for the MX crown. Infused with that Excitebike feeling only Left Field can provide, yet awash with modern accoutrements in terms of available riders, career modes and stunts, this isn't just a great motocross game...it's a racing force to be reckoned with. Has the time finally come for motocross games to reach the level of penetration enjoyed by the big sims? Activision sure hopes so, and we're with them. -DH

Breakdown

system: xbox / **developer:** namco / **publisher:** namco / **available:** march

I knew that sooner or later someone would put the legs into this category, but Namco have actually gone much further and pretty much re-redefined the genre. Strong words, you say? Indeed they are, but Breakdown deserves the accolades. Beyond the addition of visible limbs, they've essentially created a game from the vantage point of actual human sight and plugged it into a Matrix meets Blue Stinger meets Metal Gear bio-thriller mold that has you running for your life; when you're not piercing reality, discovering who and what you are. Mind-blowing, really. Stay tuned; this is awesome stuff. -DH

Lifeline

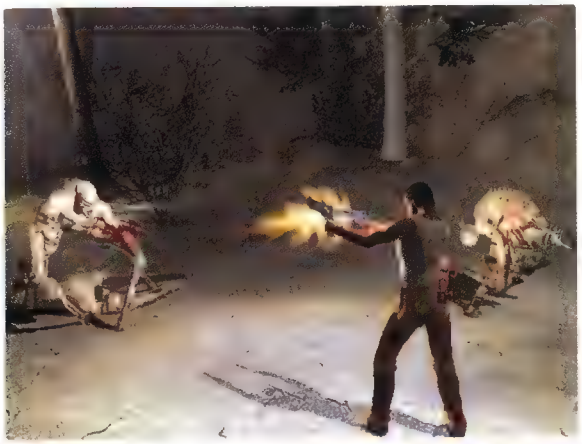
system: ps2 / **developer:** sce / **publisher:** konami / **available:** spring

Over three years in development and already a success in Japan as Operator's Side, Lifeline is one of the most unique games you're likely to play this year. The setting is a lavish hotel of the future, situated in a giant space station. When the hotel is attacked by aliens, you must escape under the guidance of a character known as Rio, using voice commands over your headset to communicate with her. With over 100,000 phrases and 5,000 specific words in her vocabulary, the level of recognition is unprecedented. -BF

The Suffering: Prison is Hell

system: ps2, xbox / **developer:** surreal software / **publisher:** midway / **available:** february

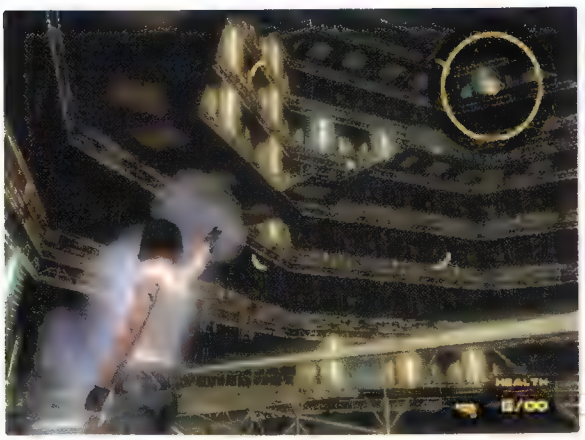
Contrary to past reports (by me) of being overly gratuitous, the Suffering is more metaphysical than hyper-real; the maximum-security Abbot State Penitentiary serving as a backdrop for an ancient evil dating back to the 17th Century. In other words, blast, hack and slice away, guiding the protagonist Torque (who's either a murderer or being majorly f'd with) through his apparition-laden, blood-soaked trek; it's just a Manson video... I still maintain that this is a solid M (Vice City is Tiny Toons in comparison), only now in a good way. -DH



Pitfall Harry: The Lost Expedition

system: ps2, gc, xbox / **developer:** edge of reality / **publisher:** activision / **available:** february

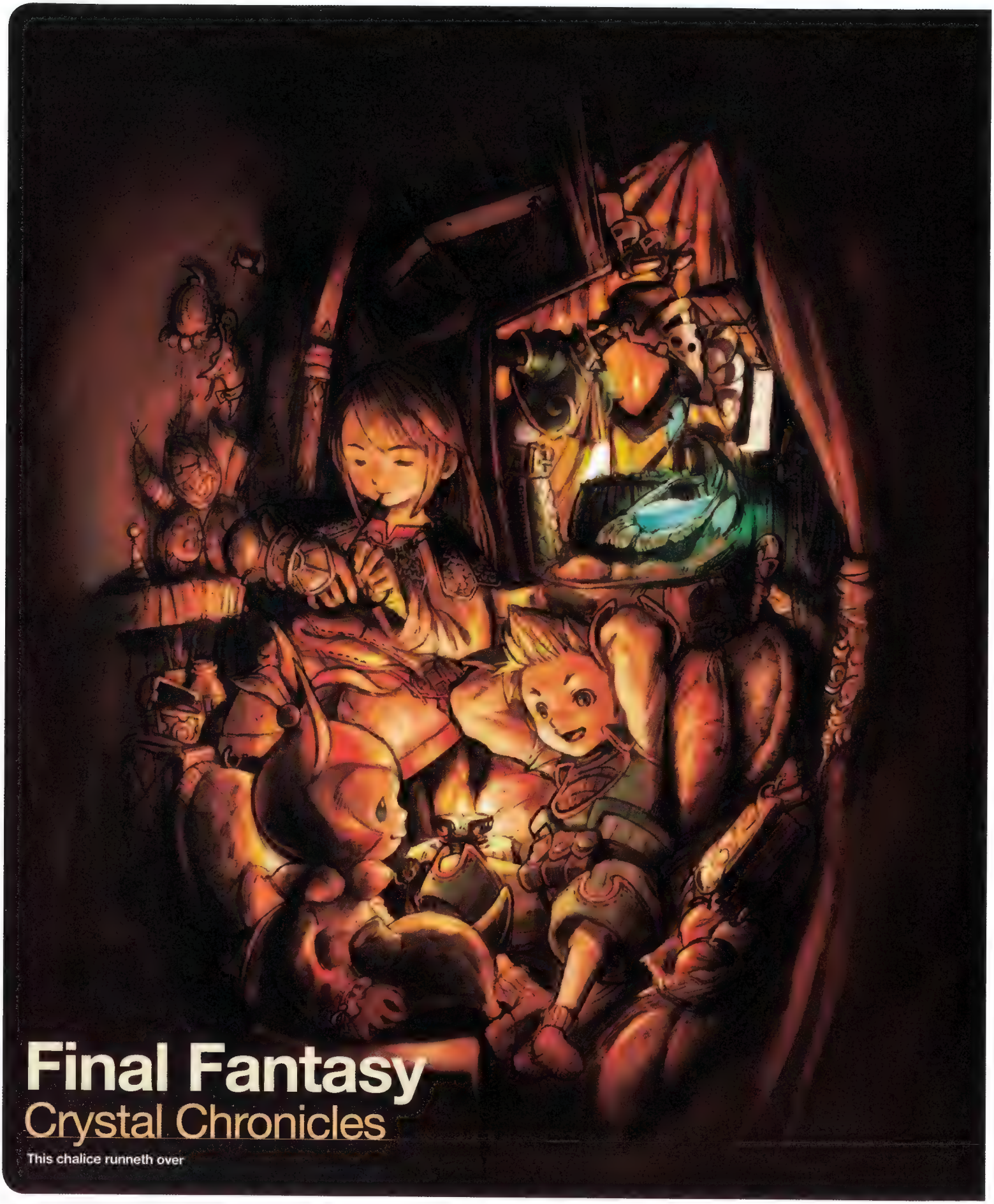
Pitfall's six-month (give or take) delay will likely prove a wise decision for Activision, as he takes on his best (and hopefully final) guise, as a sort of manga-tised Dudley Do-Right. He's even got a girlfriend...well, sort of; she just doesn't know it yet. Above all, the new adventure—doused in lush jungle settings, clever puzzles and an epic feel—is rigged with a sizeable backpack of tricks, ranging from tried-and-true swinging mechanics (which you can now target) to a skillfully nuanced melee system to a plethora of new tools like pick axes, a pogo stick, sling shot, blazing torch and a shield. Sounds good, Harry; lock it down at 60 and I'll be a true believer. -DH



Headhunter Redemption

system: ps2, xbox / **developer:** amuze / **publisher:** sega / **available:** march

"Above" is a glittering metropolis of glass and steel towers; "Below" home to undesirables and misfits. Jack Wade, now veteran Headhunter, is charged with maintaining law and order in both, along with his new sidekick, the streetwise Leeza X. Together they will face the ultimate criminal masterminds of the underworld (once again by super bike or stalking) and purportedly their darkest fears. Two distinct worlds, two distinct characters, two distinct play styles and an orchestral score by award-winning composer Richard Jacques, [illegible] underrated developers. Redemption will be one to remember. -DH



Final Fantasy
Crystal Chronicles

This chalice runneth over

The mind is a wonderful thing. Separated from something we love long enough, we're able to compensate, filling the void with something new to avert the emptiness of separation anxiety. The death of 2D is a perfect example. Anyone who's been there knows that you can never duplicate the feelings you got playing Super Metroid, Symphony of the Night or Gunstar Heroes, but because we know we'll never see another, we find a way to stem the desire. Graduating from games like Link's Awakening, ActRaiser and Landstalker into the current 3D deluge, I convinced myself that the reason I rarely got those butterflies playing today's games was simply a matter of complacency; Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles has overruled that notion.

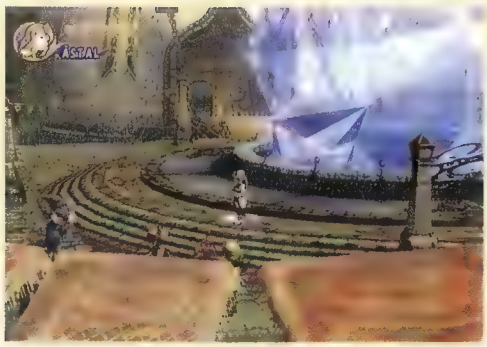
A game of simple monster disposal at the core, I've narrowed my attraction down to two factors: the overall design (sound, character and universe) and, as much, the way The Game Designers Studio deliver it—in essentially the same manner that made games before the advent of CD-rom great. Anyone who remembers tooling around Dungeon Explorer on the TG-16 or The Adventure of Link on NES, drunk on the background music, knows what I'm talking about. With every passing Final Fantasy, I've dreamt of a Square action-RPG infused with as much majesty (shout out to Vagrant Story), but I never imagined it would come to pass back on Nintendo hardware where it all began, especially in the wake of two new giant other Fantasys at Sony's house.

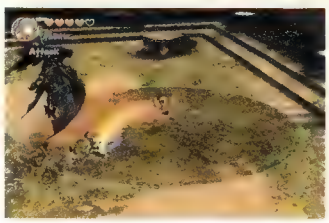
Okay, shutting it and getting to the actual review, the basis for the action, both multiplayer and otherwise, is setting out via caravan with the Crystal Chalice in tow (quite literally), battling through monster strongholds en route to each area's sacred Myrrh tree to collect precious drops of the magical fluid (conveniently located directly behind each area boss) used to retain the luster of the huge crystals that protect each settlement from the atmosphere, thick with life-draining Miasma. Since you're unable to exist outside of its life-giving aura, the Crystal Chalice is your only means of survival away from the villages, working as a means to encourage close-quarters adventuring, not unlike PSO during multi-player games, only tighter due to the limited span of the Chalice's safety bubble; whoever is carrying the Chalice dictates the flow. The other advantage to playing via GBA link is to access Moogle minigames, live menus and other content specific to the GBA. However, unlike PSO, this is but one way to play the game. There's a full, rich, single-player game, played on the standard pad, in Crystal Chronicles as well, that I believe you'll find far more compelling.

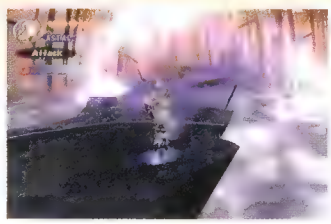
This is no Mario Party, or PSO for that matter. An adventure as beautiful as this I believe is best experienced solo, preferably on a rainy day in an empty house. If you are the sort that has three GBA-totin' pals (along with an affinity for Moogles) that can tolerate playing through a storybook Square-developed adventure, this is the ultimate game; but if you like to dictate your own pace and soak in the grandeur of Square, you're also in luck. Are you getting this, Sega?

Playing the single-player game, whenever you leave your caravan—unless you're visiting a village to forge weapons, armor or other abilities—a Moogle carries your Chalice, so the basic rule remains, only you are in control. Should your Moogle grow weary, you can either carry

"Crystal Chronicles is the type of system exclusive that made Nintendo king of the jungle back when they owned this series..."







The art in every facet of this game is without compare, every model and bit of architecture paid the utmost attention to detail.

the cup yourself, or slow things down and watch the little puffball sweat (Moogle detail is at an all-time fluffy high). Either way: Miasma bad, barrier good. The biggest difference comes by way of character development. Honing a skill set for your character (go Selkie, trust me) becomes more pivotal in the single-player game, giving rise to a better overall sense of adventure. Akin to the system in Baldur's Gate, whenever you defeat a boss, several options will appear, along with a set number of points to distribute to strengthen various attributes or bolster your Command List, allowing you more slots for instant access to spells and healing powers. The action itself is fairly basic, heavily patterned-based and addicting as hell, due to the variety of creatures, keen AI and the depth of attacks available as you rise in rank, increasing your long-range skills (triggered by charging and positioning your character's marker on the enemy, then striking) and beefing up melee for chipping away at trickier enemies. Long-range attacks are more powerful but often times reciprocated, infusing the game with a very old-school give-and-take feel, only enveloped in modern special effects. In multi-player, people have a tendency to just run around and bash monsters, aimlessly gobbling up whatever element they cough up, which has its place, but I prefer to go it alone.

As enjoyable as I found the combat in Crystal Chronicles, I was most surprised to find it supported by all of the ancillary polish Square is renowned for, from breathtaking real-time events that emerge at random on the field map to truly inspired bosses. Crossing paths with fellow travelers, just going about their business or stopping to address you for any number of reasons, ties the world together nicely, all of which is recorded in your diary to be read aloud—along with everything else you did in the year—at a festival in your honor upon your return, the villagers dancing in the streets (as only Square-designed villagers can). And prepare for some of the best real-time boss battles since the days of flicker. Huge, glimmering, bump-mapped monstrosities—this is how levels are supposed to end, with each toppling followed by the spellbinding act of collecting Myrrh. Somehow this team has converted the hand-drawn splendor of games like Legend of Mana and Saga Frontier II into 3D. Astonishing.

The combination of the action, high adventure, quaint bustling towns and villages, Moogle wisdom (like little Yodas they are) and the best Square soundtrack since the SNES days add up to the most immersive overall universe I've experienced on the GameCube, if not on any next-gen console. Imagine the addictive nature of 16-bit adventuring united with visuals so arresting and vibrant you'll swear you're playing the next Nintendo system and that's this game.

Crystal Chronicles is the type of system exclusive that made Nintendo king of the jungle back when they owned this series, and although it comes at the twilight of the GameCube's life expectancy, together with exclusives like Wind Waker, Zelda Collection, Viewtiful Joe and Double Dash, the GameCube has become a force to be reckoned with. Something tells me this war is only getting started. **Dave Halverson A**

System: GameCube
Developer: The Game Designers Studio (Square-Enix)
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: February

Silent Scope Complete

All the Silent Scope games in one easy-to-digest bundle

Fans of Silent Scope, you have just hit the motherload. Silent Scope Complete features all three arcade originals, as well as the console-exclusive Silent Scope 3. That's four games there. Not bad.

For those who haven't played it, Silent Scope is a light gun game built around the idea of sharpshooting through a scope. In the full-fledged arcade version, this effect is accomplished by means of a small LCD monitor placed in the scope of the gun, giving you a sniper's-eye view of the zoomed-out full screen in front of you. Thanks to good design across all the games in the series, this made for some very satisfying sharpshooting action and a nice change from the usual blast-a-thon of other light gun games.

The previous home versions have always lacked something then because they did not have the physical satisfaction of peering at an enemy through a scope. Indeed, they couldn't even support a basic light gun peripheral, so you were left playing a light gun game with a control pad. This is always a less than ideal situation. But that's all fixed now.

Through some clever design, the Pelican Silent Scope Light Rifle replicates fairly well the experience of playing Silent Scope in the arcade. Instead of an LCD monitor for a scope, the Light Rifle uses a basic plastic reticle which you just look straight through to the TV screen. An infra-red sensor placed just at the back of the gun senses that you've put your eye up to the scope, which brings up the zoomed-in sniper view on the screen. Properly calibrated, this ingeneous solution actually comes pretty close to simulating the arcade's effect of looking through a scope. And in another nice touch, this is first console light gun game that doesn't flash a white screen every time you pull the trigger. Funny how Konami beat Namco to the punch on this detail.

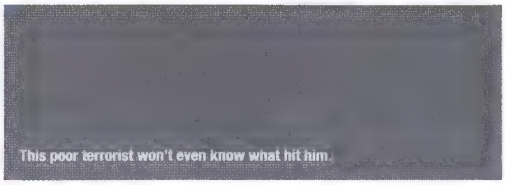
As for the games that you are shooting at, all four offer a nice range of missions and alternate pathways to explore and test your skill. One-shot challenges and frantic boss encounters keep your concentration focused and the pace fast. Unfortunately, however, none of the games look that great, with basic models and unremarkable textures. It all works, of course, and I know games like this don't get the lavish budgets, but I would be remiss not to mention it. It's a small matter, as the games more than compensate with their fun and challenge. **Michael Hobbs B+**

System: Xbox
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: February

"The previous home versions have always lacked something... But that's all fixed now."

Pelican Silent Scope Light Rifle

Of course it's a ghastly green, but Pelican's Silent Scope Light Rifle certainly works as advertised, allowing for a very close approximation of playing the high-dollar arcade version. For convenience, the barrel, shoulder mount and scope can be removed. In addition, the gun features a built-in recoil effect for added realism.



This poor terrorist won't even know what hit him.

Fallout

Brotherhood of Steel

It's only teenage wastelands

Fans of top-down gaming have some tough decisions ahead, as the Zen masters of the genre all have games hitting within weeks of each other. Dark Alliance II is the bigger, better traditional sequel, Champions of Norrath takes the archetype online, and Fallout, well, Fallout drops the whole thing into a meat grinder. In this nuclear blast from the past, the '50s went out with a bang, all right...a big bang of the nuclear kind, the aftermath of which you'll be cleaning up the old fashioned way...shoot, burn or maim first, and ask questions after you get paid. Fallout from the radiation has given rise to new viruses and mutations (two-headed cow, anyone?) but none as nasty as the Raiders and their mutant hordes…and we're not talking football.

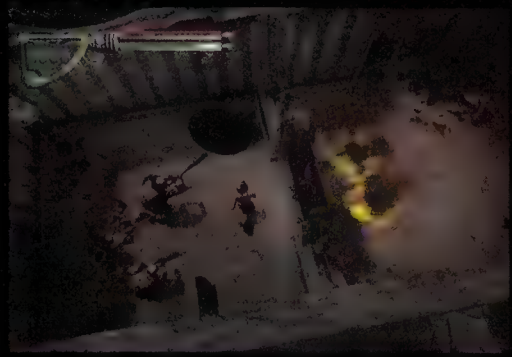
Like in Baldur's Gate, various townspeople will ask for your help in various ways; however, unlike Baldur's Gate, in Carbon, you won't be raiding any orc strongholds or retrieving precious artifacts. No, you'll be capping scumbags left and right in a fireworks display of flesh and blood, going after the town prostitute's heisted jewelry or collecting giant scorpion tails for some much-needed extra cash, and things of this nature. Baldur's magic has been replaced with metal and its fantasy with just plain nasty.

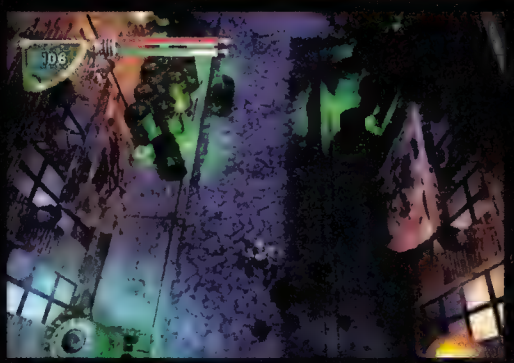
Besides standard post-apocalyptic accoutrements like burned out old cars and drive-thru burger joints, when you're not enjoying such activities as hearing a disheveled bartender's last words as he smolders in agony, this armpit of the apocalypse offers a much more labyrinth-based experience than its fantastical cousins, as well as more jumping and exploration. I was calling out for Recall Potion like a crack baby, but to no avail; Steel has a more branching overall story, and so one must be prepared to bake in the afterglow searching for the next beacon...more time to enjoy the auto-targeting system, which allows you to lock onto opponents and fire at will using a speedy dodge maneuver, or, if you so desire, grab a sledgehammer or cleaver and spill some guts. Good times.

Like all of Interplay's top-down creations, Fallout glistens with fine detail, gorgeous models, hyper-real textures and characters that aim to please. For their latest post-nuclear party, the honors have gone to Cyrus, a hulking, tattooed badass, Nadia, an über fox with a very bad attitude and, for you Iron Maiden fans, Cain, who could just be Eddie's long-lost brother. Another thing that hasn't changed is the way Interplay handles their music, which, given how great it is, always puzzles me. Like Dark Alliance, Fallout shifts between ambient (sounds like an old Yes album!) and crunching metal, neither of which stick around long enough to enjoy. Why they don't run the ambient stuff straight through I don't understand; perhaps it's so you can hear the screams of the people you're being paid to save.

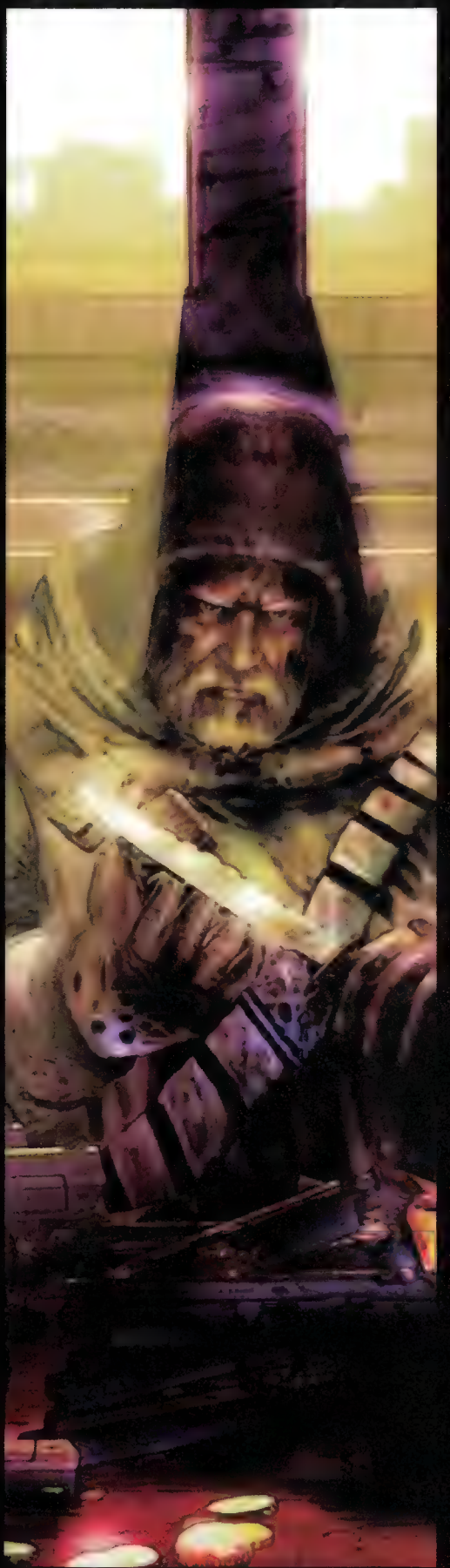
Dave Halverson B+

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Black Isle Studios
Publisher: Interplay
Available: January





"...you'll be capping scumbags left and right in a fireworks display of flesh and blood..."



Champions of Norrath
Realms of EverQuest

Snowblind journey beyond the Gates to new, uncharted virtual realms

Last [illegible] early contender waiting to battle for space on the distant Best of the Year lists. It's a sweeping, exquisitely crafted, hopelessly addictive adventure that ignites a wondrous spirit of gaming past. It's called Champions of Norrath: Realms of EverQuest—not at all the type of game I expected to react to so strongly.

The game was made by genre-experts Snowblind Studios, who were responsible for the underdeveloped yet hugely entertaining Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance—a rousing prologue to Norrath's classically inspired epic. Like in Dark Alliance, you set out to slay countless monsters throughout the land's many inhospitable forests, outposts, dungeons, fortresses, wastelands, wildernesses and pretty much anything and everything you've come to expect in a place of ancient fantasy. The game is massive in size and laid out with a master's touch for world design, spilling over with rich atmosphere and absorbing sights.

Our heroes comprise five distinct character classes representing both sexes: high-elf cleric, erudite wizard, barbarian warrior, wood-elf ranger and dark-elf shadow knight. Their attributes are, of course, quite different, and you do indeed feel the benefits and disadvantages each brings to the battle. Once you start leveling up, tailoring your hero to your liking, the game begins to soar. It's so much fun creating your version of the perfectly tuned destroyer, feeling the intricate progression and sense of growing empowerment—one of the subtler yet finer accomplishments Norrath rides

Normally I don't find much appeal in inventories that seem bottomless, but part of Norrath's excellence is the desire to collect and manipulate the thousands of items, weapons and gear dropped by the fallen and scattered in every nook and cranny. An all-around better axe, a longer spear, a stronger sword, a lighter and more durable shield, a deadlier skull-crushing mace—you want more and more, always looking for that increasingly fulfilling way to mow through the enemy line, monitoring anxiously for your hero to grow to a level where he's able to handle the finer goods. And when you do finally level up, deciding to, say, allocate points enabling you to carry more bounty, it's just one more aspect of feeding the adventurous spirit the game so dearly evokes.

Norrath's world looks fantastic. The top-down perspective affords detail and huge amounts of enemy resistance, exquisitely drawn and never lacking in big variety. When the creatures fall, they collapse convincingly and with a feeling of weight and force. Calling Norrath repetitive isn't unfair, just an exact description: you hack and slash and fire magical projectiles to an endless march of death, and that's where the brilliance lies. That's the exact path the game has chosen to travel; the keen animations, the proper nuance on character movement and feel, the way you feel alive in the quest through the RPG elements all work together to maintain our highest interest.

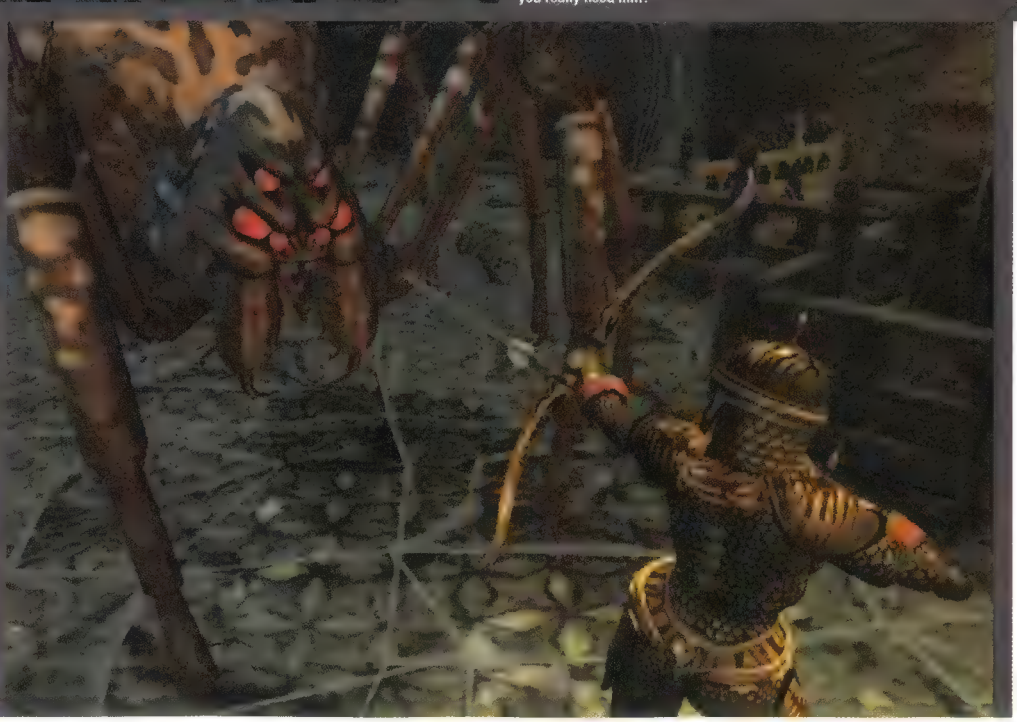
There's a story playing out here too. Maybe it is more than a bit hackneyed and even silly at times, but I enjoyed the weight it ultimately gives the adventure and, at the very least, found myself interested in the explanation for what was going on all around me. If you dig this genre of storytelling, you'll be much more involved than I was.

When the game stumbles, there's always something around the corner to forcefully pick it back up. Some dungeons do go on longer than they should but are far, far from boring; some I want to play again and again (they're randomly generated). Playing the game multiplayer, or online with three friends, is really where Norrath generates its most energetic charm and makes you disregard some of the downers in the single-player experience. For all Champions of Norrath: Realms of EverQuest offers, a magnificent action-RPG and a terrifically fun video game has been born. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Snowblind Studios
Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment
Available: February

"It's a sweeping, exquisitely crafted, hopelessly addictive adventure that ignites a wondrous spirit of gaming past."

Where's Samwise Gamgee when you really need him?



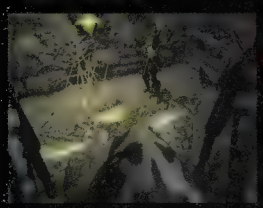
Reviews

Rating Scale

Excellent A
Good B
Fair C
Poor D
Worthless F

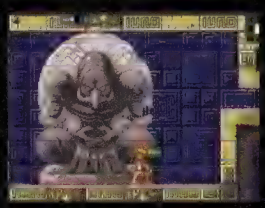
Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles

Also notice...



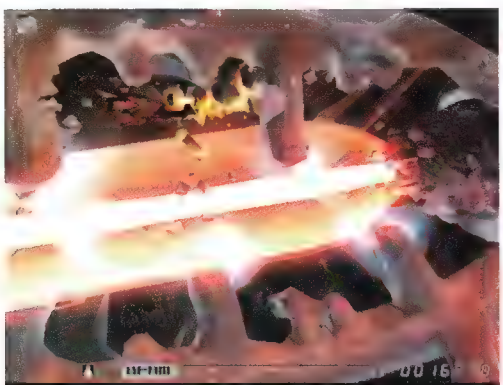
Champions of Norrath
p 044

Champions of Norrath takes the strain online, riding one of multiplayer gaming's most prestigious bloodlines.



Metroid: Zero Mission
p 052

The Metroid gamers know and love is back, returning the series to its exploration-laden roots and adding numerous enhancements.



R-Type Final

Colossal props to Eidos for releasing a 2D-style shooter amidst Sony's obvious discord with anything even remotely retro or old-school. R-Type Final is, for the most part, a polygonally juiced sequel to one of 2D shooting's most endearing series, fitted with modern effects, sentient, gelatinous topography and, best of all, the ability to discover and pilot new craft throughout, best suited to chip away at the flying behemoths and omni-directional waves of attackers. The background periodically moves out of synch with the action (like a movie playing behind the left-to-right flow) and the music could be a bit more charged, but otherwise I cherished every moment returning to a genre embedded in my DNA. **Dave Halverson B**

Epic boss battles haven't all gone the way of the dodo.

AirForce Delta Strike

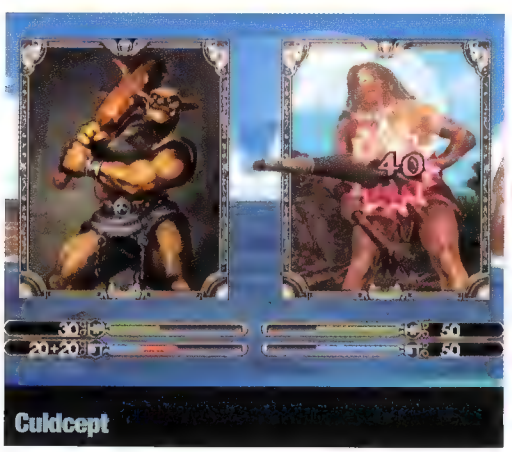
AirForce Delta was decently received when it debuted on Dreamcast, yet the game didn't have much for direct comparisons, making the flaws more tolerable than they should have been. Same goes for this decent sequel. This time out, AirForce Delta Strike goes for a story-driven approach to its presentation, which ends up crippling the better moments with vapid dialogue and off-putting anime-style character drawings. Missions are nicely varied and provide fun setups, but more urgent excitement and a good rush of flight would have been beneficial. And while there are countless planes to battle with, from experimentals to props, there should have been more focused emphasis placed on making a smaller handful more deeply engaging. **Brady Fiechter B-**

Monster 4X4: Masters of Metal

Somewhere out there, I'm sure there are thousands of Americans drunk with jubilation over Monster 4X4: Masters of Metal—quite possibly the most comprehensive monster truck game ever created. Not one to frequent the monster truck circuit, I don't see the attraction, but I know a good game when I play one and this one is okay—good physics and frame rate, nice replays, intuitive camera, in-depth career mode, scantily clad bimbo in the parts department...and enough stunts to keep even the most demanding Bud man busy for days. Donuts, stoppies, wheelies, endos and flips keep the pad working overtime. The announcer redefines annoying, the truck models leave much to be desired and the celebration animation's damn funny, but a solid game otherwise. **Dave Halverson C+**

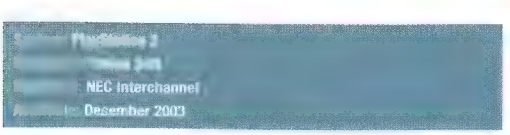
Gotcha Force

I was pretty excited about Gotcha Force initially. If we've still gotta catch 'em all, what better way than engaging in frantic 2-on-2 elimination-style team combat that rings of Virtual On? Unfortunately, all the cool stuff in the game—specifically the awesomely designed 190+ toy robot warriors you use to build up your army and the varied abilities that go with them—don't fix the flawed up-close-and-personal combat. Everything is great at a distance, but as soon as you close in on an enemy, the camera goes insane, the targeting becomes questionable and the game often decides that you can only use melee weapons even if you're out of range. Gotcha Force's neat concept didn't follow through in its execution. **Chris Hoffman C+**



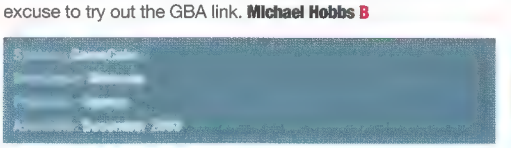
Culdcept

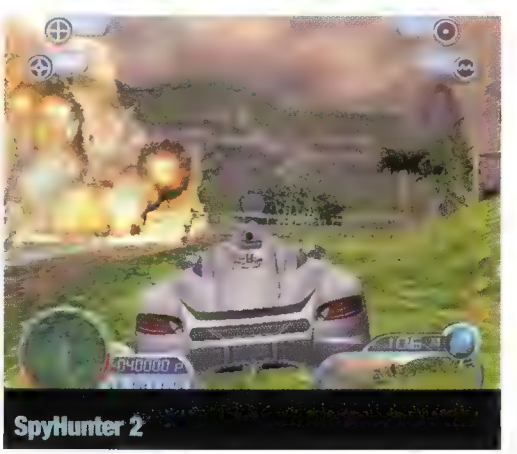
Blending a unique board-game and card-game setup for its foundation, Culdcept is deeply complex but not at all intimidating, offering an intuitive rule-set across a huge collection of cards involving monsters, spells and special items. Carefully customizing your deck for the next battle to conquer the board is a big part of the appeal, and once you get into the higher levels of progression, the multiplayer aspects get especially involving; this one definitely belongs in the company of friends. There is an old-school flair going on that works just fine enough, but the game isn't relying on its atmosphere to grab you. What does shine is the cards themselves, which feature work by a ton of distinct Japanese artists. **Brady Fiechter B+**



Pac-Man Vs.

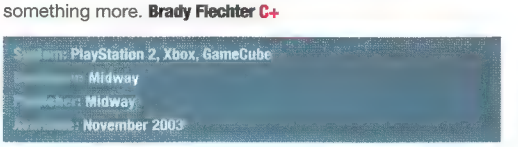
Bundled free with GameCube copies of R: Racing Evolution, Pac-Man World 2 and I-Ninja, Pac Man Vs. is a very fun and simple two- to four-player game designed to show off the capabilities of the GBA-to-GameCube link. One to three players use standard GC controllers and control the Ghosts displayed on the TV; the other uses the GBA and is basically playing a normal version of Pac-Man, with the Ghosts being controlled by your friends. The TV displays views for each of the ghosts, meaning that the GBA Pac-Man player has an advantage as he or she can see the entire maze on their little screen. If a Ghost player manages to catch Pac-Man, then that player will then take control of the GBA and play as Pac-Man the next round. It's a great little free game and a good excuse to try out the GBA link. **Michael Hobbs B**





SpyHunter 2

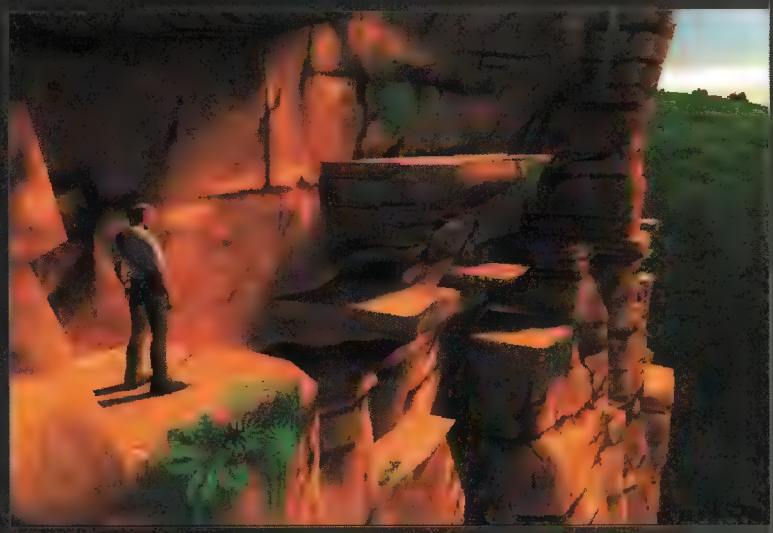
It would be almost more appropriate to call SpyHunter 2 a remake of SpyHunter on PlayStation 2, which was a remake of a 20-year-old arcade game. This latest sequel does little to offer much new from before, once again providing miles of learn-their-patterns-and-unload-big-guns gameplay. One of the reasons to play this game is for the leftover spirit of the classic original, but anyone unfamiliar with the series won't have any troubles coming to grips with what is basically a run-of-the-mill action title in a heavily armored car that transforms. More physics in the water-combat stretches, more of a sense of power from your weapons and more production value definitely would have helped. This formula kind of worked last time, but it's time for something more. **Brady Fiechter C+**



Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon

Review

High adventure goes free-roaming



The latest chapter in the Broken Sword saga finds George and Nico in full, rich 3D, far removed from the rigors of point-and-click 2D. A smart, well-devised adventure hybrid, The Sleeping Dragon covers familiar adventure ground with its intelligent dialogue (splendidly acted), keen puzzles and real-world Indiana-Jones-meets-Alan-Quartermain flavor, but with the added dimension comes new functionality. Stealth (yes, stealth—mild but in here), crate pushing a la Tomb Raider, action puzzles and even a few quick-reaction scenarios have been skillfully integrated into the new formula—not quite Tomb Raider, but not quite Monkey Island either. The overall tone of the game is still laid back (more than anything, you're still scavenging around for clues and talking to colorful people to move along events), but the button-corresponding actions, along with the ability to move the characters around via analog (use a controller for this or go insane) makes for a much more engaging overall adventure, keeping with the times.

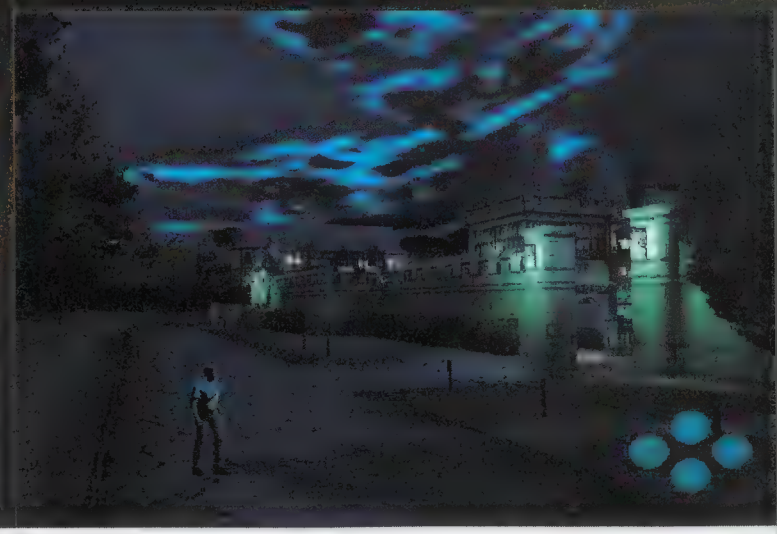
Speaking of which, the game is, for the most part, absolutely spectacular to look at—and I'm not just talking about the voluptuous 3D Nico. (George has made the most of the transition as well.) The environments, from the Congo to England, Egypt and, of course, France are meticulously detailed and lit, from fully stocked shops, down to the last postcard, to catacombs and spectacular vistas. Inside and out, human models included (many of which posses exquisite facial animation), this is as handsome a real-time, real-world adventure as you're going to get. The story, while much too dense to really lay into, surrounds a deviant by the name of Sussaro, leader of the Neo Templar (yes, one and the same...they're back), and his efforts to harness the energy that courses through the Earth at "Dragon Lines," not only to wield its power (or try to, at least...megalomaniacs never think these things through), but to keep himself alive, as he's decaying from exposure to its aura. All I know is that it sucked day and night like a cosmic vacuum. Not usually my cup o' tea, but I couldn't put Broken Sword down as visions of Willy Beamish and Monkey Island danced in my head. To every genre innovation is born; this one wears it considerably well.

Dave Halverson

Developer: Revolution Software
Publisher: The Adventure Company
Available: November 2003

"...full, rich 3D, far removed from the rigors of point-and-click 2D."

Broken Sword has come a long way thanks to modern graphic technology.



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X2: The Threat

Review

All about the Benjamins

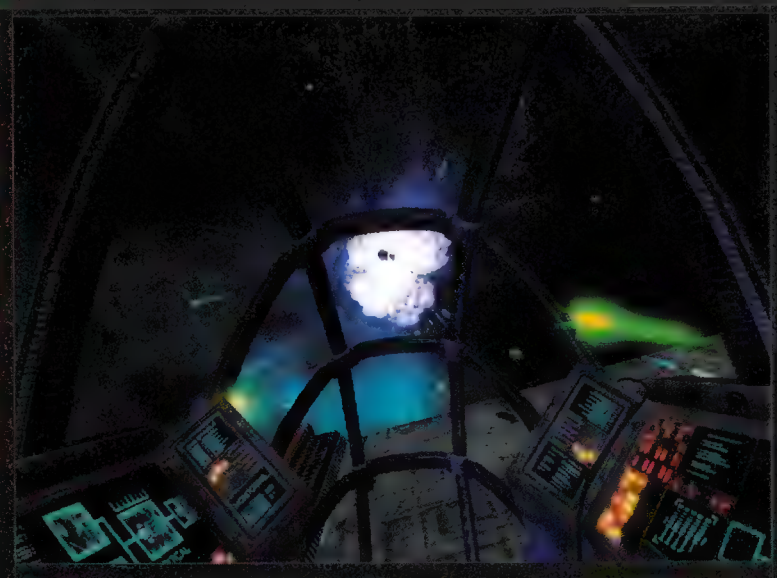
Put yourself in the shoes of a repentant spaceship pilot with a checkered past who has just been given a second chance at life among the rest of society. You are let out of jail by a man named Ban Danna, who seems to be trying to look out for you. Danna sets you up with a ship and a new job piloting for a galactic corporation. Now that you're free, what you do with your new life is completely up to you. X2: The Threat, sequel to X: Beyond the Frontier, calls itself a space simulation. With the main focus of X2 pertaining mostly to trade, and only peripherally to ship building and enemy ship battling, the term "trade simulation" is a better choice of words.

Greenbacks, Benjamins, cash money. In X2 it's all about the paycheck. Whether you are running goods from sector to sector or delivering passengers to a destination, you better be maximizing your profits. Why? Because new ships and technology aren't cheap, and money will be scarce for a very long time. Making a maximum of 5000 credits per trip (and even that amount is not guaranteed) when ships start at over 50,000 (not including sorely needed upgrades) can be very discouraging early in the game. Extreme patience is definitely needed. Only after successfully purchasing and upgrading ships, and squirreling away a tidy sum of money, can you start your own trading empire by building factories and controlling fleets of ships. However, the cost of this undertaking is absolutely staggering. Once again…patience.

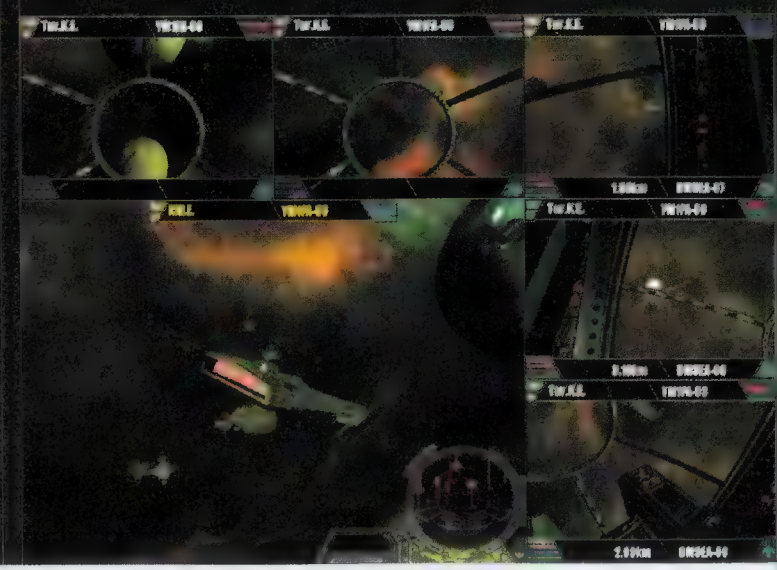
X2's highly sensitive trade system looks more complicated than it really is, although a trip through the tutorials is definitely advised. Different star systems and sectors will trade goods at different prices, so finding the best places to pick up cheaper goods and sell off expensive ones is key. Other than the massive financial disability at the start of the game, the only other annoying gameplay issue is the imprecise ship control. When on simple delivery runs, the control issues don't come into play as much. However, once it's time to lock on to enemy ships or manually dock at a station, then the true problems in the control scheme start to rear their ugly heads.

X2 boasts beautiful outer space scenes and wonderfully mapped ship models. However, while Egosoft can sure render up an amazing space-scape, the human models and animation are a little on the primitive side. But, luckily, you aren't playing this game for the human models. If you'd enjoy a solid trade sim set in outer space, then check out X2, but don't forget to bring as much patience as possible. **Christina Alexander**

Developer: Egosoft
Publisher: Enlight
Available: December 2003



X2 is so massive, it's really too bad that there's no multiplayer option.



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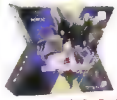
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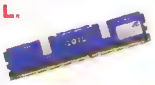
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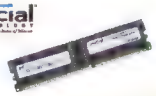
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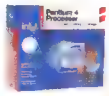
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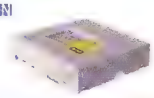
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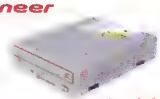
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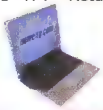
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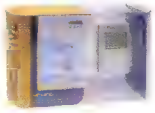
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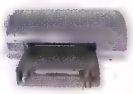
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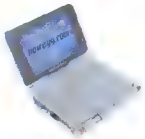
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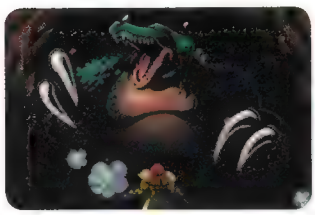


Metroid: Zero Mission

A fantastic update to a fantastic game

Nintendo has done an amazing thing with Metroid: Zero Mission. They've taken a beloved classic game, reinvented it, rethought it, retooled it, and come up with a new game that is not only better, but vastly superior in almost every way.

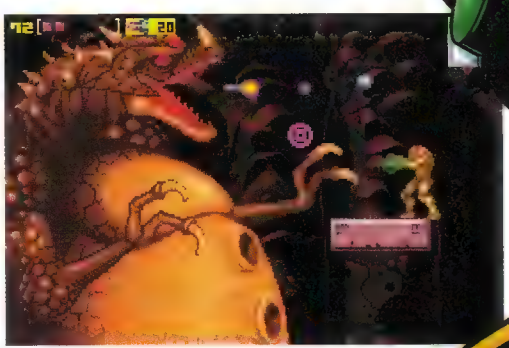
Metroid was a fantastic game to begin with, a discovery-filled trek through a grand, maze-like sci-fi world; its basic tenet of finding new power-ups to expand your exploration capabilities set a standard that was and is the basis for many a great game. Until you go back and give the NES original another shot (it's generously included here as a bonus mode), it's hard to appreciate just how much modern game philosophy has improved Metroid. Everything is enhanced—the graphics and sound improvements are a given, but little adjustments to the level architecture, move set, and item placement also go a long way. Of course, new abilities are present, like the Super Metroid-born dash move and power bombs, a few new enemies are thrown in as well, and the new in-game map is a life-saver.

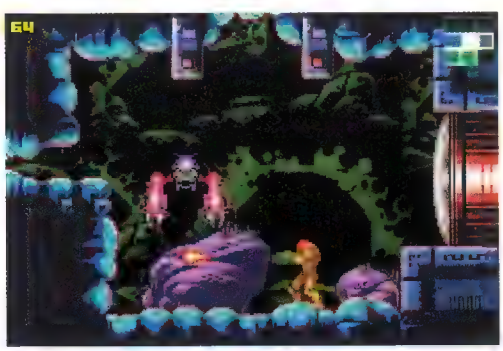
What the programmers have done with an already brilliant game—turning the series' focus back toward exploration with less emphasis story at the same time—is nothing short of awesome. Too bad the all-new stuff doesn't quite match that standard. Filled with survival/stealth gameplay (how'd this Splinter Cell get into my Metroid!?) and lacking sufficient use of new abilities, the hour-long epilogue that occurs after Samus defeats Mother Brain is rather anti-climactic; after all, nothing can beat that palm-sweat-inducing escape from Tourian. Perhaps if they had worked this segment into the middle of the game it would have fit better.

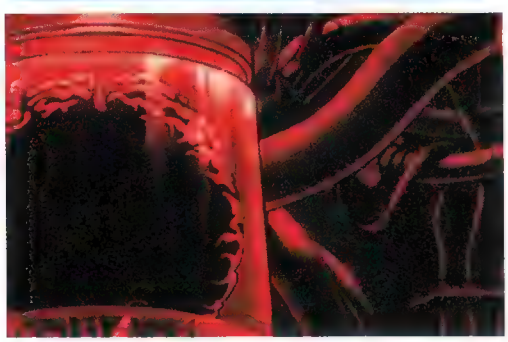
While it's a shame that the new portion of the game doesn't fully live up to what precedes it, it's still a pretty nifty addition, and it doesn't change the fact the game is still an absolute joy to play, bursting with great mechanics, filled with a wonderful sense of exploration. Even though 2004 has just begun, I have no doubt that Metroid: Zero Mission will be one of the best handheld games of the year.

Chris Hoffman A-

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: February

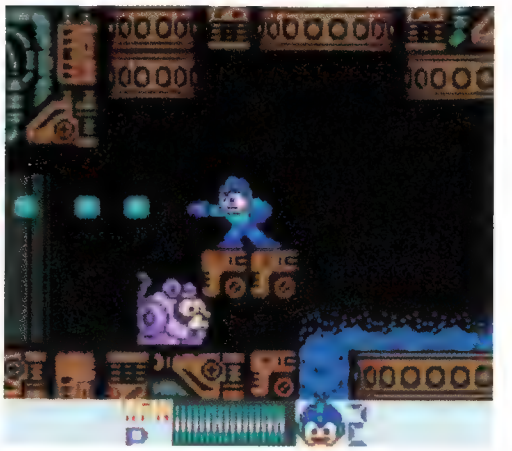






Mega Man Mania

Mega Man Mania's runnin' wild



The original Mega Man has certainly been getting around lately. Along with the previously announced Mega Man Anniversary Collection coming to GameCube and PlayStation 2 this spring, so comes Mega Man Mania for GBA: a collection of the original Mega Man's five classic Game Boy adventures. Mania not only puts five of the best games ever released for Nintendo's old black-and-white Game Boy into one convenient package, it enhances them with a full-color makeover (although the black-and-white versions are still playable) and a new art gallery exclusive to this collection. Essentially remixed versions of Mega Man's NES titles, Mega Man I through Mega Man IV again took players against Dr. Wily and his nefarious robot creations like Cutman, Elecman, Metalman, Snakeman and Pharaohman. The bosses all returned with their creative weapons and substantial challenge, along with stages that had been redesigned from the NES versions. Original levels, enemies and allies (such as Tango, Mega Man's attack kitty) also made their debut here. Mega Man V, a completely original game with enemies based on the planets, was top-notch as well. Lest old-school fans think about entering their old passwords and skipping right to each game's finale, Capcom also plans to alter the password system so you'll have to conquer each game fair and square all over again. Time to start re-training those reflexes. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Spring 2004

Max Payne

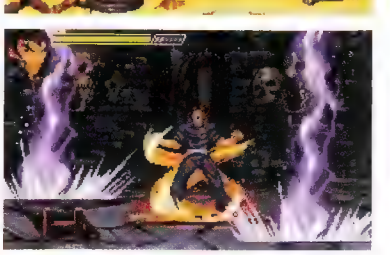
Max Payne was last game I ever thought would translate well into 2D, let alone onto GBA, but if this game would have come out on 16-bit back in the day, I'd have wet my pants. Easily the best isometric shooter available for the system, it's amazing just how much a tiny GBA cartridge can hold. The game is every bit as gritty and bloody as its 3D brethren. It's also as well written and spoken, containing a whopping 30 minutes of clear speech. The control is skillfully dialed, and the series' trademarks—bullet time and ShootDodging™, radio and TV broadcasts (Lords and Ladies!), hidden items, multiple weapons and Painkillers—are all here. There's a little slowdown, but it's a moot point given what Remedy and Mobius have packed into such a tiny package. **Dave Halverson** **A-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Remedy/Mobius Ent.
Publisher: Rockstar
Available: December 2003

Gekido Advance: Kintaro's Revenge

If this review were based on graphics alone, Gekido Advance: Kintaro's Revenge would score an A+. It looks absolutely incredible—easily the best-looking GBA game yet. How'd they cram Saturn-quality 2D into a GBA cart? The rest of the game, however, doesn't quite live up to the same standard. Though I understand the need to add exploration elements to the brawling action in order to ward off repetition, I think it serves more to detract from the gameplay at hand. Moves are few, while the animation seems to be missing a few frames, which leads to a lot of cheap hits from enemies that you'll literally never see coming. In fact, when it comes to the difficulty, the game is downright dirty, so be prepared for some frustration before you see the end. **Chris Hoffman** **B-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: NAPS Team
Publisher: DSI Games
Available: December 2003



YiR

Year in Review

[illegible] play [illegible] Our pick for [illegible] and now, well, [illegible] as predictable as ever. First-party action and adventure always seems to worm its way into our top s[illegible] Looking back, 2003 was a pretty great year [illegible] take a few 800 lb. [illegible] Fable, Psychonauts, Sudel[illegible] and Sonic Heroes—all games th[illegible] spots, now all slated for early- to mid-2004 [illegible] nothing else, the first half of 2004 should be one of the best ever heading into E3 and the unveiling of (among many, many other things) the latest [illegible] Conker for Xbox, a certain Thevius Raccoonus and perhaps, just maybe, the first hard facts on the next wave of consoles. So without further delay and no more ado, our 31-page farewell to 2003.

2003

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The Panel

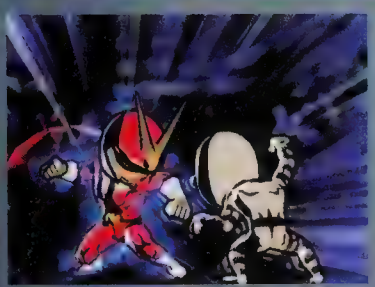
Dave Halverson	Brady Fiechter	Chris Hoffman	Michael J. Hobbs
Editor in Chief	Executive Editor	Senior Editor	Art Director
Personal view:	Personal view:	Personal view:	Personal view:
p 080	p 082	p 084	p 085

Action Game of the Year

Viewtiful Joe

The genius behind Devil May Cry, Hideki Kamiya, put his mind to the lost art of 2D gaming and, if nothing else, reawakened its spirit for one gleaming final bow. Cut out in diorama layers like a dark stage play, Kamiya's unlikely hero swept gamers into a celluloid dream where he used his VFX powers to reclaim his love. Sylvia, and the imaginations of 2D-action-deprived gamers everywhere. In one fell swoop, as Viewtiful Joe proved a forgotten format viable and set the screen ablaze like never before with a bevy of effects-based play mechanics that made Viewtiful Joe as compelling as it is dumb-cool, visually arresting and crazy fun. Captain Blue made the Viewtiful one Joe made time his slave; the rest, as they say, is history.

System: GameCube
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom



Honorable Mention

Castlevania: Lament of Innocence

Koji "Iga" Igarashi stepped out of the Metroid mold and back into pure action with Lament of Innocence, the latest addition to the legendary Castlevania saga—an elegant, hauntingly beautiful hunt for the ever elusive Dracula starring Leon Belmont, the first in the lineage to take up the whip. While we still lust after another 2D offering (as will always be the case), the combination of Iga, Ayami Kojima and Michiru Yamane has proven itself once again video game royalty.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami

Wario World

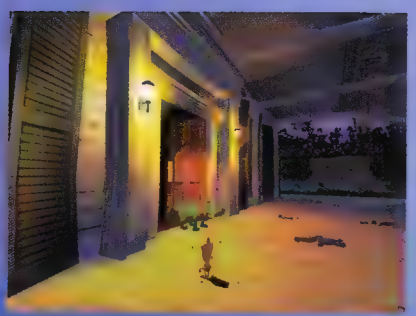
Since Mischief Makers and Sin and Punishment, we've pondered the notion of another Treasure-developed Nintendo exclusive, and it couldn't have happened to a nastier guy. Wario World delivered a blistering super-charged mix of action, platforming and boss fighting imbued with the kind of mayhem and madness only Treasure can bring. He came, he chortled, he took back his loot. Nintendo would be well served keeping Treasure under their wing.

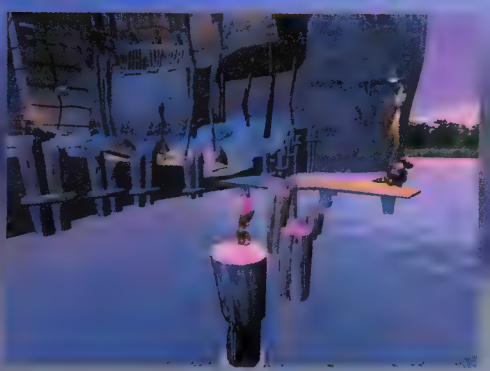
System: GameCube
Developer: Treasure
Publisher: Nintendo

Platform

Game of the Year

Voodoo Vince





Where mascots were once the anchors of the industry (does anyone remember pack-ins?), they've since all but disappeared from the gaming landscape, aside from Mario and Link for Nintendo. Sure, Sony has Ratchet and Jak, but they're not "the brand." The same can be said for Voodoo Vince concerning Xbox. Beep Industries' 10 inches of burlap and buttons took us through a twisted Big Easy, tainted by voodoo [illegible] on his way to becoming the most distinguished original character in the Xbox arsenal. It remains to be seen whether Vince will ride again, but either way, he provided the Xbox faithful who count Marios and Sonics in their sleep with a little taste of [illegible]me. Voodoo Vince is pure platforming bliss...double-[illegible]p, spin, hover and when all else fails...drop an [illegible]house on your head! Make it so, Microsoft, or miss the fan boat to mascot town!

System: Xbox
Developer: Beep Industries
Publisher: Microsoft

Honorable Mention

I-Ninja

Namco's all-new, all-expressive, bobble-head ninja—brought to life by Argonaut Software—proved the year's biggest platforming surprise. Packing a graphic punch on par with the genre's very best, I-Ninja brought the goods, incorporating several play styles into one massive multi-hub-based adventure. We can't recall another game where you pilot a giant robot, roll spheres, grind, half pipe, grapple and engage the enemy in anime-style aerial assaults...can you? Didn't think so.

System: GameCube, Xbox, PlayStation 2
Developer: Argonaut
Publisher: Namco

Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg

Not too many people seemed to take notice of Sonic Team's wonderful Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg. Given that "fruity" games are no longer in vogue, this is perhaps understandable, but there is no excuse for overlooking the fun and brilliantly concieved gameplay. In true Sonic Team fashion, Billy Hatcher almost feels out of control at times, but there is method to the madness as the game encourages the chaos and rewards you for it.

System: GameCube
Developer: Sonic Team
Publisher: Sega

Adventure

Game of the Year

The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker

Zelda is pure magic from start to finish, and an easy choice for Adventure Game of the Year. Only Nintendo can make a game that is so effortlessly good. The buttery control and genius battle system instantly mark the game out as something special, but it's when you spend time with the game that the brilliance of its look and overall design strike you as being something out of the ordinary. This is a very special game indeed.

System: GameCube
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo

Honorable Mention

Armed & Dangerous

The only loony bin we know that produces triple-A software, Planet Moon, has launched their first Xbox adventure, stuffed with English wit, seriously manic shooting and the oddest assortment of weaponry we've ever seen...and then Roman straps on a jetpack! Armed & Dangerous puts up some of the best graphics ever seen on the box and then runs you through a myriad of sorties so bent you can hardly believe you're agreeing to it. Killer moles, tea-drinking robots and a blind, smelly old seer running amok after a book on basket weaving, amidst glorious visuals...what's not to love, save maybe the pork porking?

System: Xbox, PC
Developer: Planet Moon
Publisher: LucasArts

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

The best remake of a classic this year—or any year, for that matter—the elegant Prince of Persia soared with its gorgeous animation, sensational lighting effects and involving mix of effortless action and sprawling platforming. Few games looked and played this good, topped off with keenly integrated storytelling and superb voice acting.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Ubisoft
Publisher: Ubisoft

Role-Playing

Game of the Year

Final Fantasy X-2

The best-selling, most cherished role-playing series in gaming undergoes major shifts in style and tone. The result: one of the best Final Fantasy adventures yet. With the frothy, pop-infused sparkle marking the all-girl cast of sphere hunters, Final Fantasy X-2 took some warming up to for those balking at the loss of tradition, but once you felt the magic, there was no escaping the game's endless wonders. The battle system returned to the ATB approach and, with the sphere grid shake-up, has never been so engaging. And of course, as is so often the case with a Final Fantasy, visual miracles abounded.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Square Enix
Publisher: Square Enix

Honorable Mention

Xenosaga Episode I: Der Wille zur Macht

FF may be our fantasy RPG of choice, but Xenosaga is tops when you're talking pure sci-fi. Xenosaga is an epic in the truest sense if the word, one that runs deep in both its gameplay and its mind-contorting story, and one that gives gamers the follow-up to Xenogears that we've waited so long for.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Monolith
Publisher: Namco

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

Like all red-blooded Americans, we love Star Wars, but didn't derive the kind of jubilation the rest of the world did playing KOTOR. While we found the art wanting, the fighting engine unattractive, and the text too heavy, there's no denying that it is one of the deepest, most epic RPGs ever created. KOTOR is certainly the best American RPG ever and a bright shining star in the Star Wars video game galaxy.

System: Xbox
Developer: BioWare
Publisher: LucasArts

Action-Shooting

Game of the Year

Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando

How can a game as great as last year's Ratchet & Clank get this much better? Better weapons, better character designs, better levels, much better action and humor—what a wonderful game! Some of us argue that this is one of the best games the genre has seen, and we all certainly agree: nothing topped Going Commando's distinct melting pot of action and shooting this year.

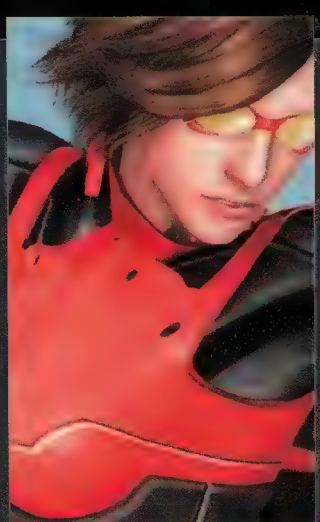
System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Insomniac Games
Publisher: Sony

Honorable Mention

Zone of the Enders: The 2nd Runner

Playing Zone of the Enders: The 2nd Runner is an absolutely immersive experience. Thanks to some of the most fluid, intuitive, responsive controls around, ZOE2 lets you become one with your orbital frame and your controller, skillfully fighting with gun and blade in newly varied missions, all looking absolutely beautiful and filled with edge-of-your-seat action.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Japan
Publisher: Konami



P.N.03

Starring in the single most stylized ground-based action-shooter ever devised, P.N. 03's Vanessa Z. Schneider proved a study of poetry in motion, playing duck-and-cover with a mechanized enemy in a trek that would ultimately bring her face to face with a shocking reality. The mixture of Kubrickian sets, the best techno score in years and a control set that got under your skin by plugging into hers, P.N. 03 proved more than just a game; it sent out a vibe inviting gaming's most elite players to jack in and get turned on.

System: GameCube
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom

Shooting

Game of the Year

Ikaruga

Even though the world doesn't seem to take notice anymore, there are great old-school shooters still being made, though none quite so impressive as Treasure's Ikaruga. Designed with a monk's attention to detail, this razor-sharp shooter somehow manages to surprise even as the genre seems to have exhausted every possible play mechanic. By deftly combining the red/blue [illegible] dynamic of Radiant Silvergun with a trendy bullet reflection and absorption system, Ikaruga's gameplay will push any gamer's skill to the max [illegible] cheap. Only a [illegible] can put you through a shooting of concentration like this game can.

System: GameCube
Developer: Treasure
Publisher: Atari

Honorable Mention

Mobile Light Force 2

From out of nowhere came XS Games' Mobile Light Force 2 (better known as Shikigami No Shiro in Japan), blowing old-school shooter fans away with its deep technique and hardcore challenge (while simultaneously appalling us with the worst title screen and box art we've seen all year). But no matter—with its intense action and $15 price tag, there's more than enough to enjoy.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Alfa System
Publisher: XS Games

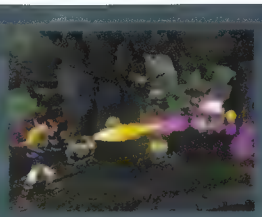
Panzer Dragoon Orta

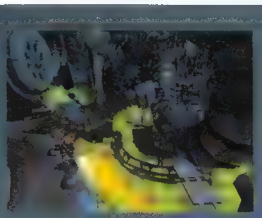
Smilebit can do no wrong. After the double triumph of GunValkyrie and Jet Set Radio Future, enthusiasts waited patiently for Smilebit's take on Team Andromeda's Panzer Dragoon series, certainly one of the most beloved shooters of all time. As expected, Panzer Dragoon Orta was a marvel, full of visual wonder and equally thrilling gameplay. The game was tough by today's standards, and all the better for it. The only thing it lacked was the pristine art direction of Panzer Dragoon Zwei.

System: Xbox
Developer: Smilebit
Publisher: Sega

Hybrid

Game of the Year



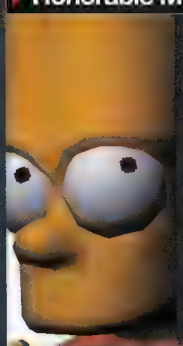


Jak II

As we knew it would, GTA III has spawned a genre, its clever mixture of free-form mission-based driving and action sorties now spreading to other brands, none so boldly as Jak II. Naughty Dog went out on a ledge with their post-Bandicoot brand, not only fitting their dynamic duo to a new engine, but at the same time making the tale darker and the gameplay old-school difficult. The end result is a game so beautiful it defies the hardware and so deep it takes 10 hours before you realize what you signed up for—so long that the single most epic action-RPG ever created. If you could buy one game in 2003, this would be the obvious choice. Jak II deserves a place in gaming history as the first platformer to successfully transcend its genre.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Naughty Dog
Publisher: Sony

Honorable Mention



The Simpsons: Hit and Run

Could Bart and company beat GTA at its own game? Homer in a Muumuu or Vercetti in Don Ho…you gotta go with Homer, yes? We certainly think so. The Simpsons Hit & Run does pretty much everything right, juicing the GTA mold with more action, more driving satisfaction, more vehicles and, of course, giggles over grit. Hey Vercetti, don't have a cow, man. It's all good. Road rage now comes in two flavors.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Free Radical
Publisher: VU Games

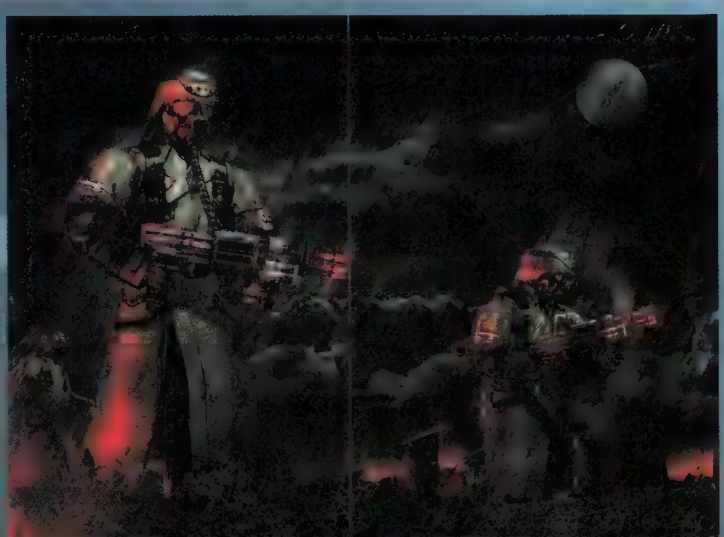
Grand Theft Auto Double Pack

While GTA III and Vice City belong on the 'box, wouldn't it be nice if they were designed for it from the ground up? Still, PS2 hand-me-downs are better than nothing, and Rockstar generously juiced the existing games as much as possible for their new home…a commendable bonus seeing as how the game would cause a stampede regardless. Plus, who can resist that shiny box?

System: Xbox
Developer: Rockstar
Publisher: Rockstar

First-Person Shooter

Game of the Year



Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Tides of War

It may have been one of the most basic, straightforward first-person shooters of the year, but there was no other game in the category with this level of design mastery. Every step through the Nazi-infested halls carried with it a rush of adrenaline as the enemy razed enemy took aim with nasty precision. From the mood to the look to the feel of the combat, Return to Castle Wolfenstein was a Doom-like treat. No need for complexities when the sweat is dripping from your brow.

System: Xbox
Developer: Nerve Software
Publisher: Activision

Honorable Mention

Medal of Honor: Rising Sun

The Medal of Honor series has definitely offered greater experiences than this, but that's not to say Rising Sun didn't pack ample FPS goods. The opening depiction of the infamous Pearl Harbor ambush was harrowing and while the pitch dropped from there, the game remained mostly entertaining on its path through well-known World War II hot spots.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: EA LA
Publisher: Electronic Arts

XIII

What style, what presentation, what a fantastic way to wrap traditional first-person concepts in a comic-book inspired adventure! XIII had its flaws as a frenetic action experience, but a fun story and rich universe served as a solid lifeline to the dead weight. Nothing like sniping with a crossbow…

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Ubisoft
Publisher: Ubisoft

Racing-Sim

Game of the Year

R: Racing Evolution

It may not have been the pure Ridge Racer experience some might have wanted, but R: Racing Evolution delivered the same magical control and feel that [illegible] ne expected. The clever introduction of the pressure meter truly brought something new to the experience, giving a sort of action-game [illegible] to the racing itself, making for some very thrilling one-player experiences. This is a game to [illegible] appreciate the finer points of racing and driving above all else.

[illegible] GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco

Honorable Mention

Need For Speed Underground

Need For Speed Underground almost literally blew the doors off of circuit racing this year by infusing chick factor, a blistering soundtrack, tuner cars galore and a graphics package that hovers somewhere between "holy s—t!" and "f—ing awesome!" with precision control and mucho depth.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: EA
Publisher: EA

Colin McRae Rally 3

This is about as far away as one can get from that dreadful NASCAR business, and Colin McRae Rally 3 wears its European class and style on its sleeve, making a really good fist of being a rally game. Superb physics and graphics carry the promise of the game's stylish shell through.

System: Xbox, PlayStation 2, PC
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Codemasters

Racing-Fantasy

Game of the Year

Mario Kart: Double Dash!!

Mario Kart: Double Dash!! is the kind of game you pay for months, if not years, taking it through its various multiplayer places even long after the GameCube is placed in retirement. All the Nintendo icons were here, as appealing as ever, teaming up for the brilliantly simple driver-gunner racing. Throw in the classically tuned battle matches and you've got a game only Nintendo can cook up. A pure delight.

System: GameCube
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo

Honorable Mention

Tube Slider

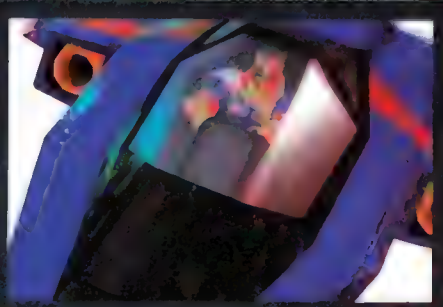
NEC's first game back hit the tubes and barely made a ripple at retail, but that doesn't change the fact that it's brimming with amazing design and physics, with more nuances than any racer deserves. An acquired taste? Perhaps, but given its old-school (circa Super Star Soldier NEC) vibe and GC exclusivity, it's time to get tubular, um, dude.

System: GameCube
Developer: NEC Interchannel
Publisher: NEC

F-Zero GX

Sega were a perfect choice to make this latest F-Zero for Nintendo. Steeped in the ways of fast arcade racers, Sega brought their considerable talents to bear in Nintendo's futuristic racing concept and the result was a gorgeous, addictive and FAST game.

System: GameCube
Developer: Sega
Publisher: Nintendo



Music

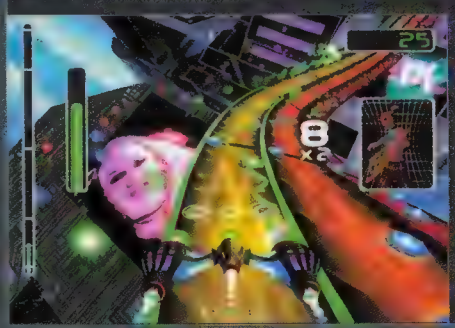
Game of the Year

Karaoke Revolution

If there are two companies in gaming that know the music genre, they're Konami and Harmonix. Now the two have teamed up to take the next step beyond the ubiquitous Bemani games, that being the ingenious Karaoke Revolution. It's simply natural evolution at work. The greatness of KR lies not just in its incredibly fun-to-sing play list or its penchant for turning your living room into a karaoke bar. The truly wonderful thing about Karaoke Revolution is the game's impressive ability to differentiate between those of us who can carry a tune... and those of us who should never be heard outside the shower.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Harmonix
Publisher: Konami

Honorable Mention



Amplitude

This eye-candy-filled sequel to Frequency is perhaps one of the most unique members of the music game genre. Amplitude doesn't just require the player to tap buttons to the beat, it allows for deep customization of the song itself. It takes everything Frequency did well and does it better.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Harmonix
Publisher: Sony

DDR Max 2

Dance Dance Revolution first took arcades by storm and has lately been taking living rooms by storm. Although the premise hasn't changed much through its various incarnations—more than a dozen worldwide—the innate fun remains in each entry. Max 2 continues the DDR tradition of great music and incredible addictiveness.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami

Fighting

Game of the Year

Soul Calibur II

The verdict is still out as to whether Soul Calibur II bested the original Dreamcast masterpiece. It's difficult to improve on such greatness, so Namco basically stayed true to the perfect feel of Soul Calibur, adding in new fighters, all new stages and music, and a new quest mode for unlocking a bevy of items. It truly is an achievement, the way Namco has kept the precision and speed of a 2D fighter instilled in these beefy 3D warriors. There's just nothing like clashing with the indomitable cast of Soul Calibur II.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco

Honorable Mention

Virtua Fighter 4 Evolution

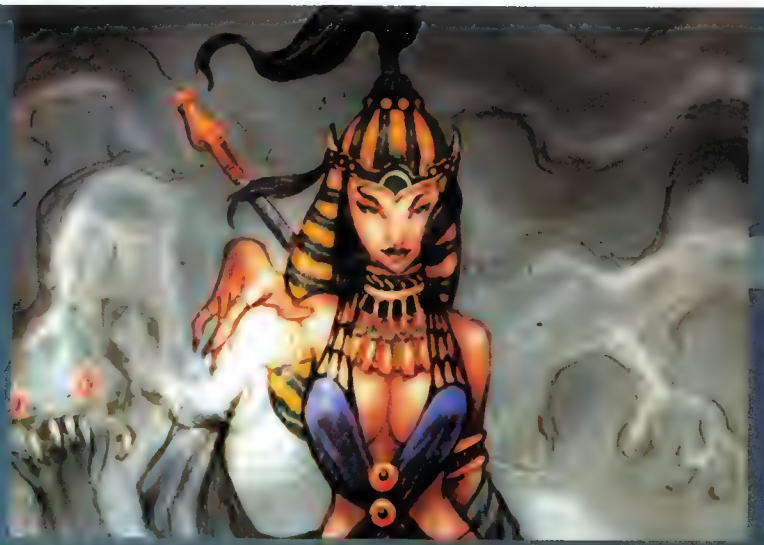
Soul Calibur II grabbed the top honors with the appeal of its style and use of weapons, but these two very subjective qualities could give way to VF4 Evo's marvelously honed hand-to-hand fighting. Evo's depths are immense, offering the hardest of the hardcore VF fans the best version yet. High respect to the epochal series that birthed a genre.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sega AM2
Publisher: Sega

Guilty Gear X2

Guilty Gear X2 entertains on many levels—from its story of a future riddled by biological weapons to its other, shall we say, more pious implications. Besides being perhaps the last original game of its kind (that being a masterfully hand-drawn and animated 2D fighter) to have a significant impact on console, the soundtrack is electric and the personas wicked cool. GGX2 is more than just a pretty face; it's a seriously nuanced 2D fighter that actually deserves mention in the same circles as Capcom and SNK, and that is an honor indeed.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Arc System Works
Publisher: Sammy



Simulation/Strategy

Game of the Year

Gladius

Yet another new LucasArts franchise has been born, forged from the blood and guts of history's brutal gladiators. Whether you were a fan of the genre or not, Gladius proved impossible to put down for the depth of its story and characters, its unremitting fun, a pounding medieval soundtrack and one of the best overworlds and front ends the game has ever seen. 2003 saw a category long dormant on console resuscitated thanks in no small part to this fantastic game.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: LucasArts
Publisher: LucasArts

Honorable Mention

Disgaea: Hour of Darkness

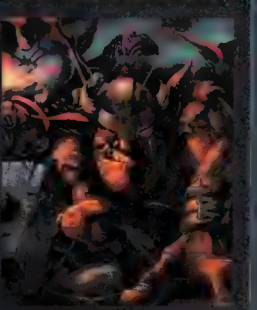
When it came to traditional strategy-RPG gaming, nothing else on console compared to Atlus' sleeper hit Disgaea. Well, considering the crazy story (homicidal angels?), ridiculously cute characters and deep Geo Panel gameplay mechanic, "traditional" might not be the right word, but the game was excellent any way you look at it.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Nippon Ichi Software
Publisher: Atlus

Goblin Commander

The once formidable Jaleco returned to the scene this year with the Miller brothers in tow, along with a string of grunting orcs, ogres, trolls and golems ready to break RTS gaming out of its tired spectator mold and into a more hands-on setting, the results of which earned enough critical acclaim to fuel a franchise.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Jaleco
Publisher: Jaleco



Xtreme Sports

Game of the Year

Downhill Domination

How'd a downhill mountain-bike game beat the almighty SSX 3? Well, it begins with an engine so robust it would [illegible], and ends with gameplay and depth so spot-on that it's infinitely replayable, or at least until the sequel hits. The folks at Incog (formerly SingleTrac) know racing, and they exercised their right to blow the competition away yet again in 2003, coming off the success of War of the Monsters and Twisted Metal Black. Pre-loading the perfect [illegible] last season and, it need be, foul play combined with some of the most gorgeous racing environs ever seen to spell second place for God's gift to snowboarding. They didn't call it Domination for nothing.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Incog Ent. inc.
Publisher: Sony

Honorable Mention

SSX3

This series is just getting started. Overhauling the engine and adding in even more dynamics to the trick system was just the start. The biggest deal had to be the newly designed mountains, which opened up from a central hub, complete with lodge and giant ski lift.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: EA Canada
Publisher: EA Big

NBA Street Vol. 2

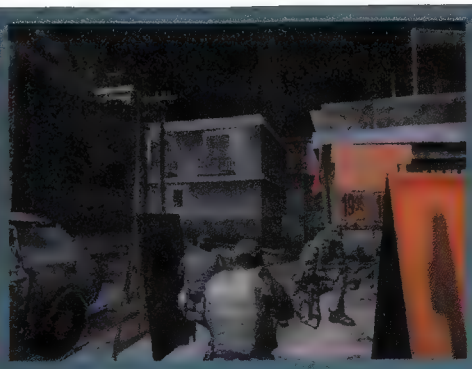
The first game was excellent. This sequel smoked it. NBA Street 2 took the stale basketball simulation to dizzy extremes, throwing in mad dunks, crazy moves and colorful commentary that never grew old. The lasting appeal to this game was astronomical, its style unrivaled.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: EA Canada
Publisher: EA Big

Online

Console Game of the Year

SOCOM II: U.S. Navy SEALS



Zipper Interactive went all out with this sequel to the already good SOCOM, and delivered the most addictive online console game this year. Its combination of great graphics, diverse multiplayer modes and good design brought the kind excitement that PC gamers have been enjoying for years, all in an easy-to-grasp console-centric design.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Zipper Interactive
Publisher: Sony

Honorable Mention

Project Gotham Racing 2

Project Gotham 2 is a great racing game made that much better by the inclusion of terrific online play. In addition to a great instant ranking system that works in single player (with Live, of course), there is the hilarious fun of racing against other living beings and hearing their screams of agony as you blow past them (and vice versa!).

System: Xbox
Developer: Bizarre Creations
Publisher: Microsoft

Rainbow Six 3

Rainbow Six 3's squad-based FPS action was absolutely meant to go Xbox Live, offering some of deepest options for a multiplayer game this year. You could play it as a simple seek-and-destroy action experience, or work smartly with your team of four to carry out a number of awesome scenarios. The way the game integrated sound deserves huge props, adding a surprising amount of impact to the experience of your online surroundings. The functionality and potential of downloadable content could keep this one at the top for months.

System: Xbox
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher: Ubisoft

Movie/TV

Game of the Year

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

The energy behind this one was astounding, the production values off the charts, the inherent Tolkien appeal a wonderfully unfair advantage for its makers. This is how you craft a movie game: re-create the sets, the action, the suspense, the richness of the cinematic glory. And somehow make it all beautifully interactive, flowing from cutscenes to game with remarkable clarity. To call it a simple action game is to miss the depths of the experience.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: EA
Publisher: EA

Honorable Mention

Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds

Charged with making a sequel to a critically acclaimed game developed elsewhere is never easy, but doing it with a series as beloved as Buffy is downright scary. Not only did Eurocom rise to the occasion, they bested Chaos Bleeds' predecessor, giving the Buffy game series as fitting a send off as UPN did the TV series. The Hellmouth is now officially closed for business. Time to start the vigil for a cinematic reincarnation.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Eurocom
Publisher: VU Games

Enter the Matrix

Shiny's brilliant execution of the Wachowskis' video game vision (best experienced on GameCube or Xbox) fell prey to the same scrutiny as the latter two films: make it too good and they will come...then whine like babies. Once mastered, Enter the Matrix played with all of the verve and steely precision of the films, in between exclusive vignettes filmed especially for the game—a true sign of the Wachowskis' dedication to the synergy between games and cinema.

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Shiny Ent.
Publisher: Atari

PC

Game of the Year

TRON 2.0

[redacted] story complete with Bruce Boxleitner playing the role of protagonist Jet Bradley's father. Dressed in blinding neon and more techie jargon than you can shake a gigabyte at, 2.0 is a glorious curtain call for one of sci-fi's most respected benchmarks.

[redacted]

Honorable Mention

Call of Duty

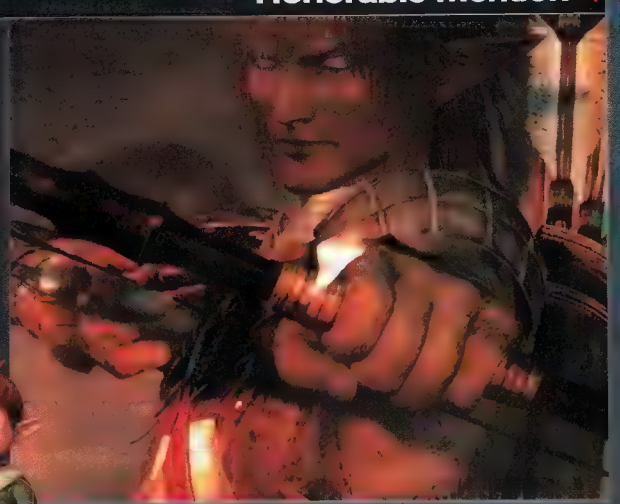
Call of Duty destroyed all the other first-person shooters riding on the foundation of war—including the previously dominant Medal of Honor series. So brutally intense was the game's depiction of the chaos of World War II, made all the more intense with awesome use of sound, that you had to pause at times just to catch your breath. But more than just a scripted pummeling of the senses, Call of Duty offered fantastic AI and skillfully gauged the balance between all-out action and critical downtime.

Developer: Infinity Ward
Publisher: Activision

Final Fantasy XI

One of the most addictive games we've ever played, Final Fantasy XI is a beautiful, long and deep MMORPG, with enough to keep a player occupied for months and months. The design is masterful, with a seemingly endless amount of tasks to be accomplished, though you have a great deal of freedom in deciding how your character will spend his or her time outside of the basic fighting and leveling up. Get into the higher levels and the game truly becomes an experience with epic quests and insane party-based combat. PS2 owners will get the pleasure in this country early this year.

Developer: Squaresoft
Publisher: Square Enix



Individual

A truly great game is more than the sum of its parts, but here is where we honor the individual elements that comprise the year's best and worst.

Best Art Direction

Final Fantasy X-2

Final Fantasy never fails to impress in the art department. By fusing a Western biker-chic aesthetic with the more traditional beauty of Spira (carried over from the original Final Fantasy X), X-2 has nurtured an amazing look all its own. Aided by the overwhelming quality of the textures and environments, this refreshing style easily took the prize for Best Art Direction.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Square Enix
Publisher: Square Enix

Best Writing + Best Voice Acting

Primal

The winner for both Best Writing and Best Voice Acting is one and the same. Coming off of [illegible] successful run on PlayStation with the MediEvil series and c-12 Final Resista[illegible], Sony Europe's Cambridge Studios sought to create something truly [illegible] in Primal and ended up crafting a game [illegible] before its time. Mainstream America may be ready for real-time mind-melding but a real-time immersive fantasy that incorporates real-world complexity and gameplay prowess didn't go over nearly as well. For those who ventured into its grasp, the story and, moreover, the way in which it was played by Hakuen Litch (Daltoth from Xenosaga Jin and Andrea Kotsalas (Okar from Resident Evil 4) kept them glued to the game's otherwise [illegible] and aesthetic qualities.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: SCEE Cambridge Studios
Publisher: Sony

Best Music

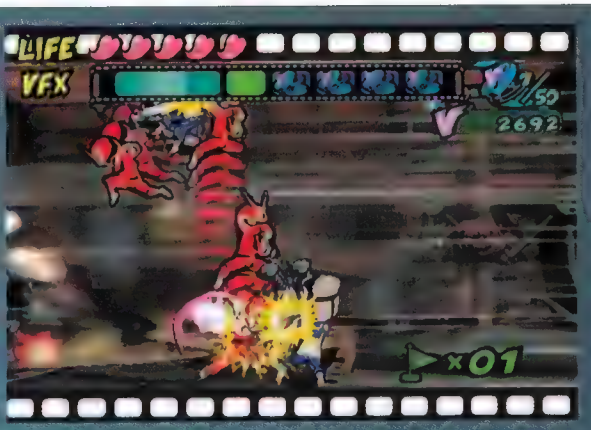
Castlevania: Lament of Innocence

Lament of Innocence composer Michiru Yamane followed up her lush, gorgeous score for Symphony of the Night with yet another masterful work. With her superb, richly emotive touch, Lament of Innocence's atmosphere vibrates with even more Gothic spirit.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami

Best Special Effects

Viewtiful Joe



Now a how Viewtiful Joe is pretty much one big, continuous effects explosion, this was one of the most categories to choose. Between Joe—his Mach Speed and Zoom, and the likes of Silvester dazzled for each, you could DO on Joe's effects alone.

System: GameCube
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom

Best Graphics

Jak II

Graphically a light race this year between Jak II and FF X-2, but in the end, we just can't stop shaking our heads at how much freaking Dog was able to squeeze out of the PS2. Some of the vistas in this game—like flying a dweller into space (the city looking down (it's all of it) through a glass floor...as well as The Palace, Haven City and Main Town—are awesome feats that simply shouldn't exist on PS2. Add to that the fact that when you arrive there there's zero loading, they're all surrounded by miles of city, the animation is second to none and the ordinary modern day visuals are nearly seamless, you can't deny this game's awesome presence. This level of immersive gaming doesn't currently exist anywhere else.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Naughty Dog
Publisher: Sony

Best CG

Final Fantasy X-2

As developers turn more to real-time for their cutscenes, the affecting art of CG is becoming a rare commodity. When it's done with this much style and beauty, this much technical skill and flash, how can you not watch in wonder? Square does it again.

EyeToy Play

Most Innovative

EyeToy

A lot of games this year innovated within their genres—Viewtiful Joe, Boktai and Prince of Persia, for example—but the EyeToy may be the only one to create its own. It's interactive electronic entertainment like we've never experienced it before, addictive with its simple fun and something that anybody can enjoy, gamer or not. If your friends and family don't get into it at your next shindig...you probably need new friends and family. Who knows what future greatness the EyeToy could bring?

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: SCEE London Studios
Publisher: Sony

Biggest Dissapointment

Nokia's N-Gage

At some point in the development of Nokia's N-Gage (kind of important, the launch of new personal computing device/phone/game machine by a major corporation) you'd think someone would have noticed: A) The screen is turned the wrong way; B) Taking the back off and battery out to insert cartridges is also known as a design flaw; and C) Playing games on a myriad of tiny buttons better known as a phone pad is the worst idea since controllers that double as hair dryers. But still they forged ahead, hanging their hopes on an ad campaign that continues to sap the company till. Launching a handheld (in the shadow of the incoming PSP nonetheless) that plays old PS games without music is foolish enough; laying a turd of this magnitude in the process is downright irresponsible. Disappointment is an understatement.

Most Underated

P.N.03

When Production Studio 4's Hiroyuki Kobayashi set out to design the world's most elegant ground-based tactical shooter starring a 10,000-polygon virtual beauty, we doubt he ever imagined it being rated in America as an action game without enough play mechanics and weird control...but for the most part, that's what he got. One of the year's best GameCube exclusives is calling all gamers with an eye for art and an itchy trigger finger. Heed the call and hypnotic shooting is yours.

System: GameCube
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom

Best In-Game Models

DoA Xtreme Beach Volleyball

An extremely difficult category in a year packed with skillfully rendered characters. Yuna, Rikku and Paine from X-2, P.N. 03's Vanessa Schneider, Jen from Primal and many more were examined before surrendering to the undeniable grandeur of the girls of DOA XBV. Ornate costumes are one thing but when it comes to nuances like the folds of arm and leg joints and the subtle realism of actual human behavior, no one did it quite as well as Team Ninja. One hop across the pool is all it takes. Lucky Zack!

System: Xbox
Developer: Team Ninja
Publisher: Tecmo

Best Character Design

Final Fantasy X-2

Or perhaps the award should be called Best Costume Design in this case. The characters in Final Fantasy X-2, especially lovely leading ladies Yuna, Rikku and Paine, were wonderfully crafted, meshing perfectly with the new peacetime Spira, but it was the ornate costume design that really stole the show. From Yuna's songstress to Rikku's black mage to Paine's version of Lady Luck, X-2 was filled with fabulous, finely detailed variations of each character. Character designer Tetsuya Nomura and alternate costume creator Tetsu Tsukamoto truly outdid themselves.

Best Character: Female

Vanessa Z. Schneider

It took all of five seconds to sort out this category as the entire editorial crew let a simultaneous "Vanessa." In a perfect world (hell, in an okay world), P.N. 03 would have spawned sequels based on her animation alone, but in this day and age, everything seems a crapshoot. Nevertheless, a stunning tribute to the female anatomy and Japanese character design starring in an intoxicating shooter isn't exactly something to cry about. Just play it once in each suit and pretend they're sequels.

Best Character: Male

Joe

If the suit fits... What's not to love about an everyman's average Joe that likes to watch classic sci-fi in empty art house theatres (well, besides that)? In Joe's case, less really is more: he's just a dude until he answers the call to vanquish his fallen superhero's foes using VFX powers whilst rescuing his promiscuous sweetie from the clutches of B-movie hell. Plus, no one else could make "Henshin-a-go-go baby!" actually sound cool.

Best Character: Non-Human

Voodoo Vince

Besides being lovable and cynical all the same time, Clayton Kauzlaric's Voodoo Vince (19 inches of burlap, buttons and stuffing high on voodoo dust) brought something else new to the mascot table: a character aimed squarely at those gamers who grew up on critters. Designed for the mature platform gamer (there's an oxymoron for you), Vince — along with his sweet double-jump, spin and hover — grumbled his way across a tainted Big Easy, enduring mob hits, dubitous drops, bow mashing and mutilation all for our pleasure. Voodoo dust has its advantages.

Kiddy Grade

FIGHTING CRIME NEVER LOOKED SO GOOD!

With every completed mission, Éclair grows suspicious towards the organization she serves. As an elite GOTT ES Force operative, she cannot die. A past that is lost slowly begins to haunt her.

Her destiny awaits... again.

Created and Directed by:
Keiji Goto (Martian Successor Nadesico, Sorcerer Hunters & Gate Keepers)

Animation by: GONZO
(Hellsing, Full Metal Panic!, Vandread, Gate Keepers & Last Exile)

- Case One- The Peace Keepers
- English and Japanese Audio
- English 5.1 Surround Sound
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- Original TV Commercials
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- Collection Card Pack 1 of 8
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Game Boy Advance

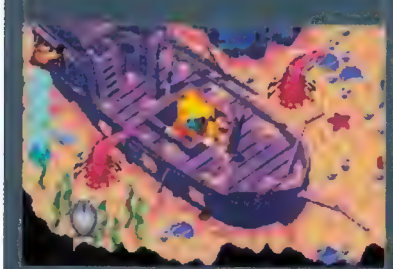
2003 Top Ten

The handheld market was continuing as strong as ever in 2003, thanks to Nintendo and their ever-popular Game Boy Advance. Not only did a load of fantastic games hit the console, but much-needed and greatly appreciated advances (play on words not intended) were made in the hardware department. First, gamers were treated to the Game Boy Advance SP in March, offering the slickest design for a portable gaming system yet along with something even more important: a backlit screen! Finally! From there, Nintendo released the Game Boy Player in June, permitting play of the vast Game Boy, Game Boy Color and Game Boy Advance libraries directly on TV (most likely alleviating 90 percent of neck pain in the gaming population). But this technological evolution would mean little without fantastic games to go with it, and the GBA received more than its fair share. In addition to the titles listed on these pages, honorable mention must be made for games like Donkey Kong Country, Golden Sun: The Lost Age, Splinter Cell, Max Payne, Jet Grind Radio, Advance Wars 2, Fire Emblem and King of Fighters. Next year should be even more incredible as Nintendo finally gets some real competition in the handheld market (no, that wacky N-Gage doesn't count) in the form of Sony's PSP.

Banjo-Kazooie: Grunty's Revenge

Hard to believe that even while Rare has joined the Microsoft stable, it's their work on Nintendo's system that continues to impress? Banjo-Kazooie takes the wealth of play mechanics and collection-oriented gameplay from the N64 games successfully onto GBA, in many ways actually improving the game in handheld form. Rare's Donkey Kong Country barely missed the cut.

Developer: Rare
Publisher: THQ



Boktai: The Sun Is in Your Hand

Innovation was a key word in making Hideo Kojima's GBA hardware one of the best handheld titles you've seen. More than just a gimmick, the sunlight sensor on these cartridges factored heavily into gameplay, providing never-before-seen play mechanics that truly provided an experience unlike any other. With Metal Gear-style stealth thrown into the mix, Boktai was a great reason to step outdoors.

Developer: KCE Japan
Publisher: Konami

Sonic Advance 2

Sonic Advance 1 and 2 were a fantastic one-two punch for the Game Boy Advance, and Sonic Advance 2 improved on the first game in every way. Sonic's speed was back, and the level design was fantastic. Sonic and Tails' ability to switch between characters on the fly added a great new twist to the gameplay, and Cream's inclusion was the icing on the cake.

Developer: Sega
Publisher: THQ

Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga

Combining a perfect balance of role-playing action and Super Mario platforming, Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga is a must-have for any GBA owner. Despite the fact that it's a Mario game, the humor is surprisingly adult, and the battle system is deep and rewarding. Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga shows that Nintendo can still make a great RPG.

Developer: Alpha Dream
Publisher: Nintendo

WarioWare, Inc: Mega Microgames!

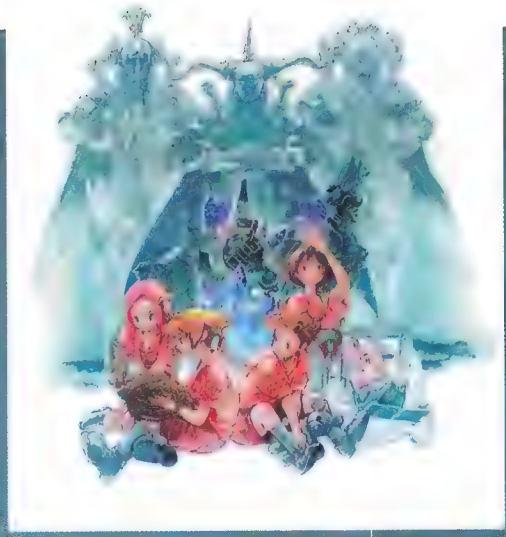
WarioWare is absolutely insane in almost every way, insanely fun to play. The vast collection of minigames will challenge you with their variety and hook you with their ridiculously addictive nature, causing you to play game after game in an attempt to achieve a new high score. Our favorite minigames? Those based on classic Nintendo games, of course.

Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo

Mega Man Zero 2

Mega Man Zero 2 is the latest in the line of Mega Man titles based on the Mega Man X series. Mega Man Zero 2 features the classic gameplay style of the Mega Man X series while providing an intensely hardcore (but fair) challenge and an evolving character, complemented by some of the best visuals the GBA has yet seen.

Developer: inticreates
Publisher: Capcom

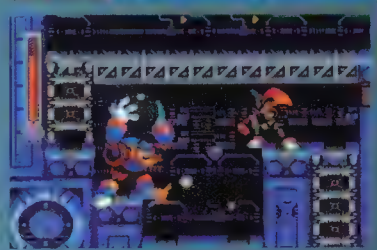


Final Fantasy Tactics Advance Investing hours at a time with Final Fantasy Tactics [illegible] strategically setting up your constantly evolving troops for battle [illegible] every move as if it could alter the entire path of the war at hand—such is the addictive involvement with a game matchless in its class. Support for the exotic genre gets little support, which made this overlooked sequel to the PlayStation marvel that much more welcome on the GBA—a perfect home for the hand-drawn wonders and lighthearted storytelling that elevated the incredible strategy.

Developer: Squaresoft
Publisher: Nintendo

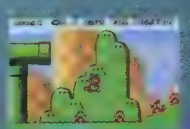
Mega Man & Bass There was once a time when [illegible] Mega Man & Bass [illegible] North America, when [illegible] game would [illegible] on the Super Famicom; then the Game Boy Advance arrived, and the porting began, and this previously lost last installment of the original Mega Man series made its debut. It's no mistake that Mega Man has been around as long as he has, and this game shows why: great levels, great visuals, great weapons, [illegible] challenge, plus 100 collectible items [illegible] substantially up the replay factor.

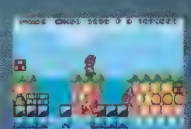
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom

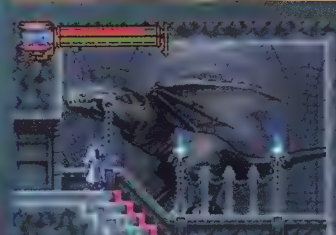


Super Mario Advance 4: Super Mario Bros. 3 There is a reason that Super Mario Bros. 3 is widely regarded as one of the greatest platformers ever created. And it's not just [illegible] from Super Mario Bros. 2 (both U.S. and Japanese versions), [illegible] with play mechanics and is as developed and refined as [illegible] See what good 2D design is all about.

Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo







Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow There was no question that the latest GBA Castlevania would be our handheld game of the year; all we had to determine is what would follow in the wake of Koji Igarashi's latest superb, portable adventure. Exploring Dracula's famed castle, battling legions of the undead and unlocking new abilities to go deeper and deeper into the bowels of Gothic horror never gets old. The arsenal of weapons and ability-bestowing souls available to hero Soma Cruz allow for incredibly deep combat options, while music from Michiru Yamane and character designs by Ayami Kojima create audio and visual bliss. Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow is nothing short of phenomenal.

Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami

Sports

Phew! What a year for sports. 2003 was just absolutely killer. Usually we have a few standouts – like Madden and the stuff from Sega – but I don't remember when there were so many quality sports titles from other companies. Who would've thought Microsoft could play with the big boys? And let's not forget about 989 Sports. After a solid showing this year, something tells me they're the ones to watch in 2004. With online gameplay, season stat tracking, reformed world rankings and voice chat all becoming commonplace, it's a great time to be a sports gamer.

Football

Madden NFL 2003

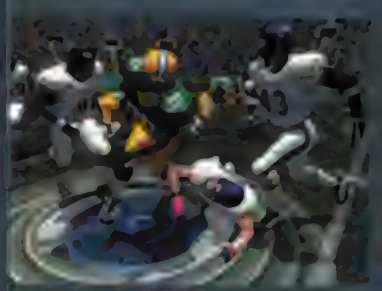
This latest Madden was the complete package. From the incredibly deep Owner Mode to the fantastic online experience, the developers really brought their game and it showed. The one feature that stood out was Playmaker Control. To be able to change the play in real time is just incredible—changing routes, redirecting receivers and adjusting coverage—no other football game gave the player this much control.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: Electronic Arts Tiburon
Publisher: EA Sports

Runner Up

ESPN NFL Football This was really a tough call to make. Sega once again put out a killer pigskin game. ESPN NFL Football brought with it two new features—First Person Football and The Crib. While First Person was a total gimmick, The Crib was a great idea. We all know gamers like to brag, and the Crib was a great way for good players to show off their rewards. Sega earns praise for some of the best tackle animations ever seen in a football game.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Visual Concepts
Publisher: Sega



Basketball

ESPN NBA Basketball

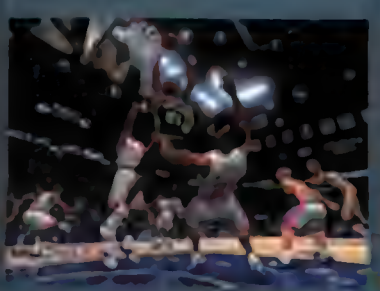
It was close, but there can only be one winner, and ESPN definitely had the superior basketball game. New for 2003 was the 24.7 mode, where you got to create a player and take him around the world. While the Iso-Motion control took a little bit to get used, it worked really well. But what was the deciding factor? The visuals. The players' animations were a lot smoother than Live's, and the all of the arenas just looked incredible.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Visual Concepts
Publisher: Sega

Runner Up

NBA Live 2004 Again, another hard call of me to make. With NBA Live 2004, it was all about battles in the lanes. Defensive AI was tweaked way up, resulting in a more realistic gameplay experience, while changes in the offensive control scheme gave players more control. Other standout features include online gameplay via EA Sports Nation, a great Dynasty mode and the best two-man announcer team in basketball game ever—Marv Albert and Mike Fratello.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: EA Vancouver
Publisher: EA Sports



Baseball

World Series Baseball 2K3

The sleeper baseball hit of last year was Sega's 2K3. With improved fielding and better AI, Sega's game edged out EA's great MVP Baseball game. Sega upped the ante for the visuals as well. Showcasing new animations for dives and double play turns, the game had a whole new look and feel. Other key improvements included better base running, adjustable AI and ESPN presentation.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Visual Concepts
Publisher: Sega

Runner Up

MVP Baseball 2003 EA did a great job with their newly revamped MVP Baseball game last year. The most compelling aspect about it was the new pitcher/hitter interface. Players actually had control over the effectiveness and accuracy of their pitches dependant on how precise their wind-up and release was. How well you batted was determined by the player's "real life" hot and cold zones, ratings and swing time. Together with excellent commentary and visuals, EA did baseball right with this title.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: EA Vancouver
Publisher: EA Sports

Hockey

ESPN NHL Hockey

Sega did it again, putting out an absolutely stellar hockey game with all the trappings and extras to make it 2003's best. Just like The Crib in football, NHL Unleashed is the goodie-filled bonus, and it's graphics have also been upgraded to a major way. With standout visuals—some of the best glass effects ever seen in a hockey game—slow play-by-play commentary, sound design and atmosphere combination, Sega's hockey game is virtually flawless.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Visual Concepts/Radical Entertainment
Publisher: Sega

Runner Up

NHL 2004 Although Sega edged out EA Sports for best hockey game of 2003, EA's Dynasty mode [illegible] made up for it. For 2004, players were able to trade away players in the game—[illegible] choose to draft players for the first time in the draft history. Being a [illegible] offered players [illegible] and new trainers. The level of detail was pretty extraordinary, and the online play on PS2 was pretty damn good too.

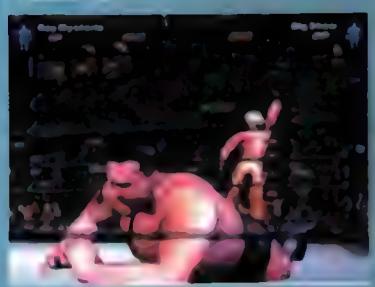
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: EA Vancouver
Publisher: EA Sports

Wrestling

WWE SmackDown! HCTP

Just as Madden has become synonymous with quality football games, so has SmackDown with wrestling. Each is packed jam-stuck everything they had into this new installment of the series, including the basic gameplay and offering up some of the most incredible character models ever produced. With a near-limitless number of models, legend characters, amazing custom character options and the best career mode a wrestling game has yet been hooked up with, there's no denying that SmackDown is the champ.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Yuke's
Publisher: THQ



Runner Up

Def Jam Vendetta has the distinction that was released for both consoles and is among the games on this list. It's also one of the few titles on EA Trax, and the result is an excellent, if somewhat simplified, take on the wrestling genre. Whether the realistic graphics and licensed soundtrack are your thing or not, there's no denying the game is the ultimate

System: PS2, GameCube
Developer: Aki
Publisher: EA Big

Golf

Tiger Woods PGA Tour

EA Sports did it again with their latest Tiger Woods game. They managed to improve upon the gameplay, made the visuals perfect and gave us online gameplay that was just way cool for words. Coolest feature of them all? EA Sports Game Face. The level of customization was pretty astounding. And when you combine that with a great career mode, superb online play and excellent pick-up-and-play, Tiger Woods is the no-brainer golf

System: PS2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: EA Sports
Publisher: EA Sports

Runner Up

Links 2004 was the last that Microsoft was developing their venerable Links from the PC to the Xbox was worth getting excited about, bringing with it total XSN implementation and stellar graphics. It's not to say another high-quality golf game out there besides Tiger Tiger Woods, a more arcade approach from EA's game. The game has been tuned so just about anyone can pick up the controller and play. But where Links pleases is the visuals. From the textures to the player models, Links has Tiger beat in this department.

System: Xbox
Developer: Microsoft
Publisher: Microsoft

Soccer

Winning Eleven 6 Int.

This was close. Really close. When Winning Eleven 6 came out last year, FIFA 2004 wasn't even released yet. Now that both titles have faced off, Winning Eleven 6 scores as the title of Best Soccer Game of 2003. Where FIFA is aimed at more of the hardcore soccer player (which might deter beginning players) Winning Eleven 6 has incredibly balanced gameplay that's easy to dive into. Although the player models aren't as detailed as FIFA's, the overall game is stellar.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami

Runner Up

FIFA Soccer 2004 Once again, EA Sports brought out an excellent soccer title last year. The most compelling new feature was Off the Ball Control. Here players utilized the right analog stick to select secondary players and organize plans of attack on the fly. Ball control and passing were also tweaked for faster gameplay. Career mode also made its way for the first time in FIFA. Although not as robust as in other sports, it was nice to see it added. The online gameplay on PS2 was also quite good.

System: PS2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: EA Vancouver
Publisher: EA Sports

Tennis

Top Spin

Pulling an ace from their sleeve was Microsoft with their flawless Top Spin. Showcasing beautiful graphics, excellent online gameplay and a pretty cool Create-A-Player feature, naming Top Spin Best Tennis Game of 2003 is a no brainer. Having players tour the world and compete for sponsorships and cash was a great way to open up the game to all levels of players. Coupled with responsive controls and excellent sound, Top Spin will be the tennis game to beat next year.

System: Xbox
Developer: Power and Magic
Publisher: Microsoft

Runner Up

Tennis Masters Series 2003 Come on, how do you even compete with Top Spin? But in all fairness, there must be a runner-up tennis game, and for 2003 it would have to be Tennis Master Series 2003. A blatant attempt to mimic Sega's brilliant Virtua Tennis, Tennis Master comes up a bit short in terms of gameplay and features. Although the visuals and player models are quite good (the motion blur was a cool effect) the gameplay doesn't feel as polished as similar games.

System: Xbox
Developer: Microids
Publisher: Hip Interactive

Overall Console Winners

PlayStation 2

Game of the Year

Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando

Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando is a game that really seems to have it all. It's a tactical shooter, it's a platformer, it's a racing game, and each facet of this gem is gleaming with awesome visuals and superb controls. In almost every regard, Going Commando improves upon the original by offering more of what we loved about the previous adventure, strengthened with great new features and enhanced challenge. Even after victory is yours, there's so much more to do—and when a game is this good, you'll want to play through it again and again to power up every weapon, find every secret, cherish every moment.

Developer: Insomniac Games
Publisher: Sony

GameCube

Game of the Year

The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker

There is a reason why the Zelda series is so highly respected, and that's because every true game with the Zelda name, from the '87 NES original on up, has been absolutely superb. The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker is no exception, continuing the franchise's trend for superior gamemaking. As its predecessors have, Wind Waker provides a perfect blend of puzzles, exploration and combat, testing reflexes and brainpower. The story is timeless, the oceans are vast; that Nintendo manages to make every Zelda game so powerful is a [illegible]. For those players who never accepted Wind Waker because of its unique graphical style, all we can say is [illegible]

Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo

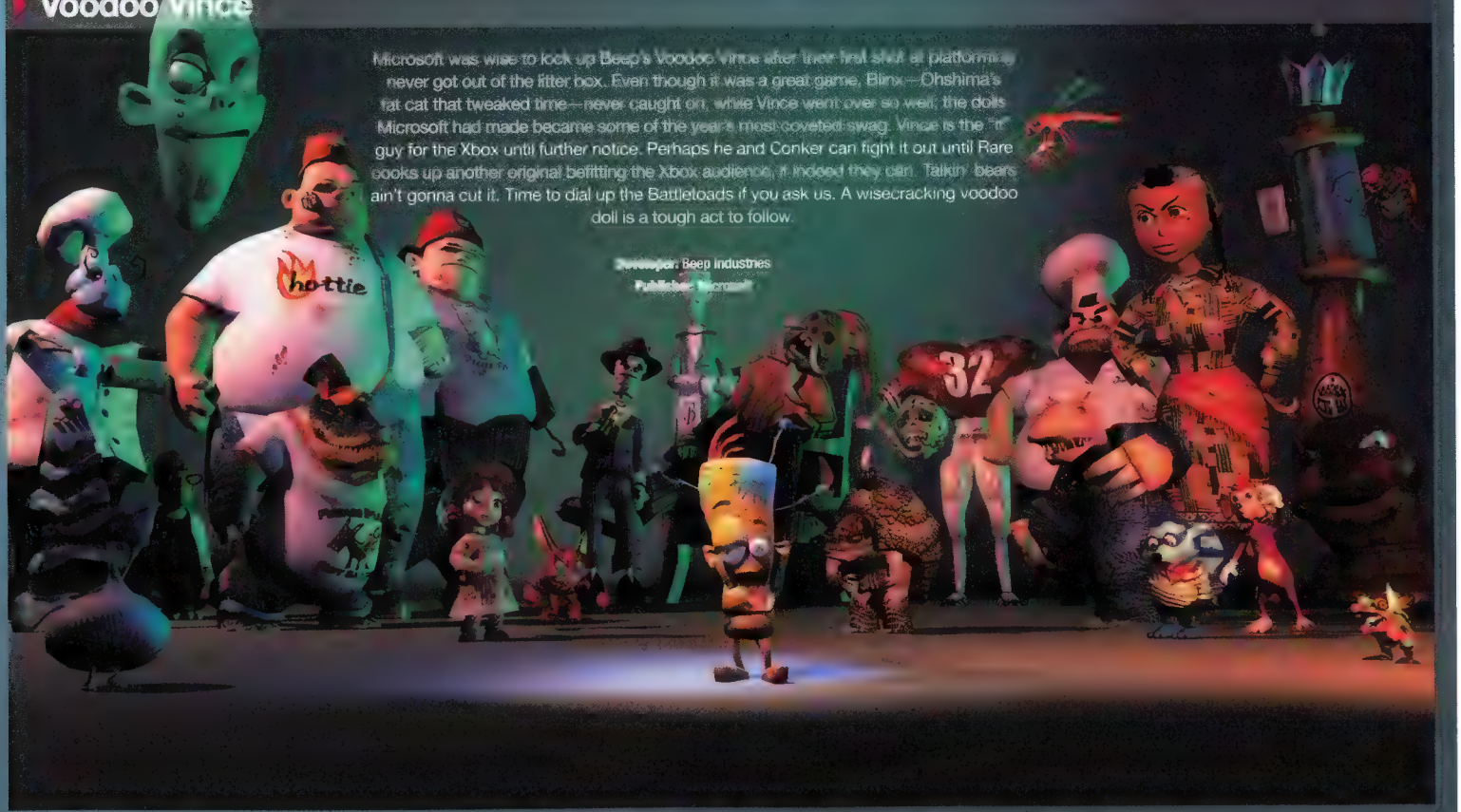
Xbox

Game of the Year

Voodoo Vince

Microsoft was wise to lock up Beep's Voodoo Vince after their first shot at platforming never got out of the litter box. Even though it was a great game, Blinx—Ohshima's fat cat that tweaked time—never caught on, while Vince went over so well, the dolls Microsoft had made became some of the year's most coveted swag. Vince is the "it" guy for the Xbox until further notice. Perhaps he and Conker can fight it out until Rare cooks up another original befitting the Xbox audience, if indeed they can. Talkin' bears ain't gonna cut it. Time to dial up the Battletoads if you ask us. A wisecracking voodoo doll is a tough act to follow.

Developer: Beep Industries
Publisher: Microsoft

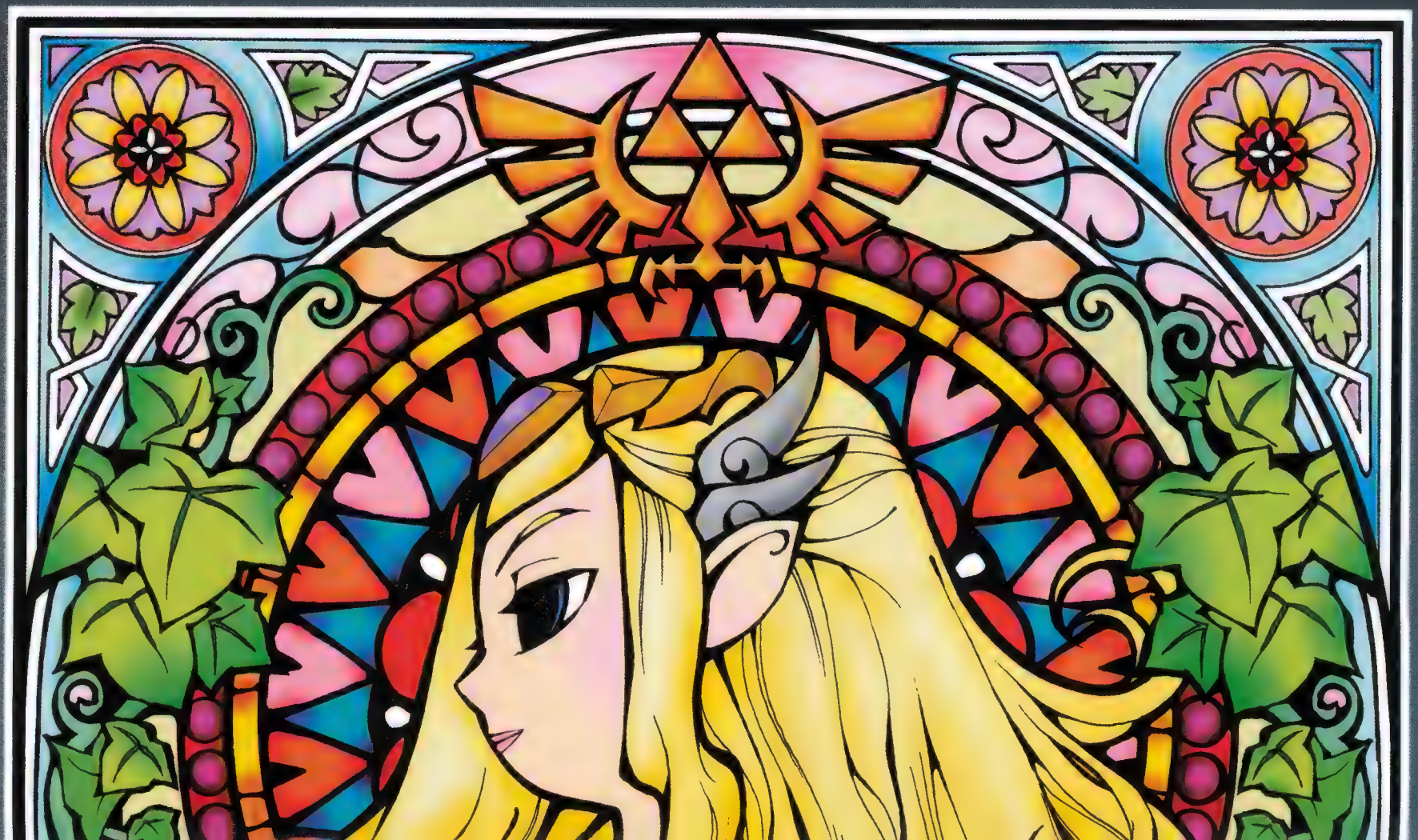


Game of the Year

The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker

There was not a single moment of arguing while crowning The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker our game of the year. Here was a game of understated beauty and gameplay brilliance, of enchanting sights and sounds that no single game this year came close to matching. Distantly following the events in the equally compelling Ocarina of Time, Wind Waker followed the richly drawn plight of a much younger Link, whose gentle spirit helped build the game's transfixing charm. With the ability to sail the seas of his enormous island world in the expressive, living boat called King of Red Lions—one of the many unique touches—our connection to the world seemed wonderfully adventurous and as if we were living in an actual place. Inhabiting these various dungeon-like areas were creatures of immense wonder and imagination, full of life in the way the gamemakers were able to invest subtle emotion in the most simplest of design strokes. Something about this game was truly different, truly a work of art.

Early on, Link discovered the Wind Waker, which allowed him to manipulate the flow of wind—the powerful force of nature that served as the clever cornerstone to the physics of the world. Beyond the game's technical achievements, there was just so much to do and interact with in so many intelligent and exciting ways that, by game's end, you felt like you were truly caught up in a complete place of believable fantasy. Something about Wind Waker sparkled in a way other games only hint at. Maybe it was the animation, maybe it was the skill of the designers forging classic levels, maybe it was the knowing level of detail given to the finer details, maybe it was the uncommon scope of so much to see and do. Whatever it was, Nintendo was working at the edge of their craft. The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker is, without question, the year's finest achievement.



Staff View

Dave Halverson
Editor In Chief

"This year was flooded with quality sequels and franchises in the making, all aimed squarely at the enthusiast and/or post-teen demographic."

My idea of the perfect Christmas vacation is making two piles: one consisting of retail copies of my favorite games of the year, and one of all the games I heard were great but didn't get the chance to review, and then barring the doors. I can play in the mountains in January; December is for the last bits of gaming before we begin the process anew. Whittling down these two piles is the closest I get to a Zen state, clearing out my internal hard drive for the madness that begins with each new year. If only I had more space.

I review a ton of games every year, and, with each that passes, take doing so increasingly more seriously as the stakes get higher (games are more expensive to make than ever) and the consumer more varied. This year, after 12 years pushing buttons instead of pencils, I found myself more excited about video games than ever, even though we seem to be at a crossroads.

2003 was a very odd year, but in a very good way—the opposite of 2002, which, like most years, saw a handful of superior games clearly standout against a sea of mostly mediocre-to-good titles otherwise. 2003, on the other hand, saw more across-the-board quality, especially in the adventure category. There were a lot of great games this year, fewer standouts and far less crap than normal. For me to leave games like Primal, P.N. 03, Rayman 3, Sphinx and the Cursed Mummy, Hobbit, Beyond Good & Evil, The Simpsons: Hit & Run, Ikaruga, Metal Arms, Buffy: Chaos Bleeds, Enter the Matrix, Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando and so on off of my Top 10, it had to be a great year, and it was. This was one of the most brutal eliminations I can remember.

The game industry is constantly evolving, and becoming more like Hollywood in the process. The downside of this is, of course, commercialization and the green-lighting of games based on brands rather than gameplay, while the upside (and the course we seem to be on) is finding the right people to make those decisions and then get a great game made. Where movie, TV and comic book games used to be a means to cash in—the big money spent securing the license left pennies to make a crap game—they've now become extensions of their respective franchises expected to hold the fort. While elsewhere, the trend of old-school game design being brought up to contemporary sensibilities seems to have taken hold, providing hardcore gamers a well-deserved stay of execution. This year was flooded with quality sequels and franchises in the making, all aimed squarely at the enthusiast and/or post-teen demographic. I just hope all of this quality can find a home; with so many good games out there, and limited retail space, things are getting a bit dicey.

I finally narrowed my stack down to 10 by dividing my list into the three different types of games I prefer most: long, drawn-out epics worthy of the many days they sap (FF X-2, Jak II and Wind Waker), medium-length adventures you can beat in a day but are so great you keep going back for more (Prince of Persia, Armed & Dangerous, Max Payne 2 and Castlevania: Lament of Innocence), and those treasured, timeless guilty pleasures you can fire up any time and have a blast (Voodoo Vince, Viewtiful Joe and Wario World...with P.N. 03 on the bubble).

And so another year of gaming has passed. Over the past 12 issues, whether I've agitated you with my optimism, provided food for thought, or made you take a chance on a game you'd have otherwise passed on, it's been a pleasure. I can't wait to do it all over again...again.

Personal Top Ten

10 Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne
The paper towel dispensers in the morgue work...you can shoot bad guys through gaps in catwalks...and it has better TV shows than we do! I'd rather watch Lords & Ladies or The Adventures of Captain Baseball Bat Boy than Friends... Max Payne 2 may fall a bit short when it comes to ancillary character models, but every other aspect of the game shines as brightly as Max's cheap leather coat, making it the epitome of intelligent, mature gaming. Max is the benchmark for cinematic action for good reason; Remedy keeps it real, focusing on story and compelling real-world events as they propel you through the tragic, oft times depressing, world of Max Payne. Accompanied by a new breed of bullet time, graphic novel pacing and a love interest we get to fondle more than Max May Payne 2 managed to do the implausible: best Max Payne.

09 Castlevania: Lament of Innocence
Although not as platformy as I'd hoped for, everything else about Lament rang true: stunning character and creature design, beautifully constructed models, gorgeous textures, just the right mix of exploration, epic bosses, and another soaring opus from Michiru Yamane. I like that Iga went more old-school action and less Metroid with LoI; if only he'd have gone outdoors and incorporated more vertical gameplay. Above all, Lament drew me in, and that's what Castlevania is all about. I was also impressed with the English dub. My heart will always belong to IV, Bloodlines and Symphony, but Lament finally did the series justice in 3D, erasing the mistakes of the past. I still believe Konami would be better served to dish up future Castlevanias in 2D, but knowing how anti-side-scrolling Sony is, my money's on a female Belmont in 3D on PS3. Go Iga.

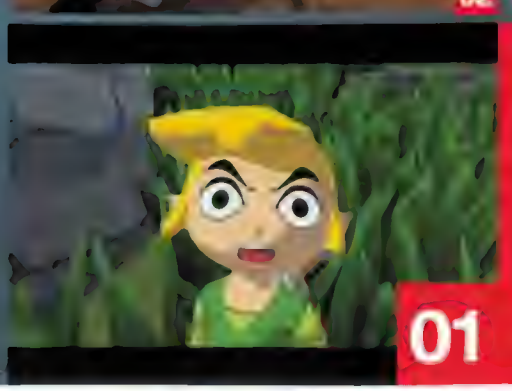
08 Wario World
Don't even ask me how a Treasure-built Wario game ended up 8th. I suppose it's because I've beaten it so many times I've come to take it for granted. As pure, unadulterated fun goes, you'd be hard pressed to find a game as wickedly cool and instantly fun as this. Wacky, super-charged and technically grand, Wario proved to me that buried beneath all of the shooters and oddities like Stretch Panic and Bangai-o, the heart of Treasure still beats. Now if only someone would harvest it (like Nintendo), we might just see another generation of games as grand as Gunstar Heroes, Guardian Heroes, Dynamite Headdy and Sin and Punishment. Here's to hoping.

07 **Final Fantasy X-2**
After you get through gasping that anything as beautiful as X-2 can appear in a number 7 slot, realize I've pretty much written off turn-based RPGs. Before X-2, I honestly never intended to play another. I find the formula tired and laborious given recent advances in technology and vowed to never waste another night on one again...until X-2. Besides being one of the most beautifully conceived video games I've ever laid eyes on (thanks to Yuna, Rikku and Paine), Square not only mix it up like they did in VII, but at a certain point in the game give the player the opportunity to adjust the frequency of battles. These factors, combined with the best turn-based fighting since Grandia 2 (the last truly great turn-based RPG), a central hub and a polished design that echoes the Square of old made X-2 the last turn-based RPG I'll ever play...I think.

06 **Armed & Dangerous**
As I played the beta version of Armed & Dangerous for my review a couple of issues back, I presumed the grainy movies (artifacts come and go like MJ allegations), along with some questionable models, were still being polished, but playing the retail version, there they were, nudging the Lionhearts down a few notches. That doesn't change the fact that I love this game otherwise, from its dirt-bound shark attacks to its illegally cool jetpack sequences and eye-popping visuals and effects. You've never seen waves crashing on sea walls like this before or, for that matter, heroes flying around with limp peasants in tow, dropping them on their doorsteps like the morning paper. The soundtrack is magically delicious, there are already new levels ready to download via Xbox Live, and it's the funniest game ever created, just besting Giants (coincidentally also from the Planet Moon). Nick Bruty and company have been on fire since Earthworm Jim and show no signs of letting up...or sobering up.

05 **Viewtiful Joe**
Had it not been for the recycled bosses and being a tad short, Viewtiful Joe would be using his VFX powers to knock my first 4 choices down a peg. The antithesis of garden-variety action, V-Joe not only brought 2D back from the grave and diorama sets into the mainstream (oh, how I dig the diorama), but Capcom had the gumption to throw a carnival of freaks the likes we haven't seen since Dynamite Headdy at a gaming public weaned on ho-hum one-offs like Tommy Vercetti and chiseled girly men. Only Capcom could pull off something this totally off the wall and still make a great game of it. I can't wait to see where they take it from here. Use the power of VFX to change the world, Joe, and keep side-scrolling action alive!

04 **Voodoo Vince**
Top honors for my beloved platforming genre go to Vince this year for obvious reasons. The amount of creativity and diversity Beep was able to engineer around a 10-inch-high voodoo doll's double-jump, spin, hover and head-butt is a testament to one of the year's tightest team efforts, if not the most promising new developer around. The aesthetic qualities of Voodoo Vince, together with the arty jazz-fusion soundtrack, dry wit and sticky gameplay, revitalized platforming closer to where it belongs, where the millions of people that grew up on Sonic and Mario can still enjoy it. They made sure to leave the magic shop door wide open too, should Microsoft decide to tap into the voodoo dust for another go round. If there was ever a franchise deserving – no, begging – for sequels and merchandising, it is it. Microsoft was wise to back Beep, let's hope they're wise enough to have them team up a sequel.



03 **Jak II**
Churning out an issue every 2-1/2 weeks in an industry where you snooze and you lose has its disadvantages, like not being able to play games like Jak II the way they're intended: sitting down with nothing but time on your hands to soak in every last drop. As much love as I initially threw Jak's way, after sitting down and really digging into the free-form aspects of it, I'm humbled by it on many levels. How Naughty Dog was able to build so much fine detail into such an immense world is beyond me, not to mention how thoroughly they've fleshed out their initial universe—which comparatively could sit on the head of a pin—in the scope of two years while creating pockets of gameplay that intensify with each passing hour, built around gorgeous in-game cinemas that never, ever load. This is a game so deep it takes hours just to nick the surface, but once you have, it kidnaps you. I was resistant to the new format in the beginning, but now I can't imagine it any other way. Innovation on this level within a two-year time frame? What will this amazing developer do next?

02 **Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time**
While they've had their share of misfires (hello, Charlie!) growing from the house that Rayman built to the superpower they are today, Ubisoft have always stayed true to their credo of producing first-party-quality third party games. Reinventing Prince of Persia in 3D has been attempted before, to a tragic end, which makes this latest feat all the more amazing. At some point in time, a group of designers (who must have known the series like the back of their hands) sat down and decided to bring the adrenaline rush of Prince of Persia to new, invigorated life, incorporating the nobility and romance of the period, while removing all of the inherent frustration of the original but keeping it pure enough for its old-school following. Right. Even if they could, it's still just Prince of Persia...right? No. This is the single greatest sequel to a classic game ever created, aside from being one of the best ever, period. The systems built into its core gameplay to ease the pain of video game death flow as smoothly as the fabric that brushes over the prince's turban, and the design and overall feel of the architecture is the best since Ico. How something so classic can be made so original, while not only maintaining but building on what made it so great in the first place, borders on the miraculous. What a spectacular game.

01 **The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker**
Could I be any more predictable? Is my old-school uniform standing out like a posse of Catholic schoolgirls at a gay bar? Last year Metroid Prime...this year Wind Waker; first-party Nintendo games continue to crawl into my brain and lay Yoshi eggs; what can I say? Not that there wasn't some inner struggle...where last year's choice was a no-brainer, Jak II and The Sands of Time nipped at Link's heels to the bitter end, but when all is said and done, to this day, no one makes fun like Nintendo. If you could bottle this feeling and sell it, world peace would come with a green hat, an ocarina and a baton. But you can't, and that's what makes it so special. While some other games may play similar to Wind Waker (sans the sailing), nothing looks like it or incorporates the masterful strokes that push it just out of every other game's reach. Link has the shortest little stumpy legs, yet they mold to every ridge in the game; pockets of civilization bustle with realistic verve; and the way that everything is laid seems to be exactly in concert with where *you* are in the adventure. Like Metroid Prime, by the time you finish Wind Waker, its blueprint is imbedded into your motor skills. Another astounding feat of mastery from the company that began it all.

Staff View

Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

"Gamers are growing up, the demographic is widening and maturing, but no one seems quite sure yet where it's all heading or how to tame the charge."

And the winner for Most Memorable Year for Video Games is: 2003. Yes, 2003—the year when consistency ruled, when so many great games crowded the holiday wish list you had to take out a loan to buy them all. The year games stood taller than ever as a respectable artform, showing us things we've never seen before, wisely reaching for the power of cinema for more emotional involvement. The year gameplay ideas, no matter how traditional, were perfected, refined, mixed and matched to remove the old ideas of how a game should fit neatly within a genre.

2003 was also the year of severe growing pains as an awkward industry giant continued to gorge on focus tests and contrived marketing, live safely in a house of sequels, strain for the right marriage between playing and watching, and toy with violence and sexuality with a stilted grasp of their true emotional weight. Gamers are growing up, the demographic is widening and maturing, but no one seems quite sure yet where it's all heading or how to tame the charge. It's great to see the mainstream, mass-media neophytes joining the cause, but shame on all the emerging low-rent television specials, and shame on the misinformed who retard the industry's continuing maturity.

With the Xbox, GameCube and PlayStation 2 affording gamemakers a newfound freedom to create visual marvels, my hope for 2004 is that there is a growing awareness of artistry over sophistication. High polygons and smooth framerates are nice, but if you can't apply an inspired coat of paint, if you can't place all this density and architecture with a keen eye, if your characters and their amazing levels of detail look like they were lifted from a cheap comic, what's the point?

One of the trends I enjoyed seeing blossom was a push to tap in to the power of film. I like scripted events. I like story and deep characterization. I like an emphasis on the world environment and mood, where the idea of a level is replaced with an entire place that feels so alive. No more playing in random spaces. It's time to start resolving stories, finding a depth of meaning in what we're doing and seeing. Watching developers discover better ways to immerse us is so exciting! But when will someone finally create a game that moves me, that resonates and sticks with me like the best of cinema? It can and will be done. Who will be the first to properly raise the bar instead of nudging it? Praise to games like Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic for leading the charge with the kind of smart storytelling that continues to elude gaming.

Yes, gameplay is paramount, but there just isn't a huge amount of open terrain to explore for original ideas—or at least no one is journeying out of their safety zones to try and find it. You have to wonder how this continued move to weave scripted and camera-driven presentation into the gaming experience compromises gameplay advancements. Some will argue we're in a boring holding pattern right now till the new round of hardware opens the locked door to spectacular new ideas. Some, like myself, will argue: won't we basically always be shooting things, exploring worlds, driving vehicles with our adrenaline forever cooking? Is it enough just as long as it's all handled skillfully well, presented with dazzle and style? Toss in characters I care about, enemies that make me think about their actions and thrill to take down, scenes of intensity I watch as well as play and infuse that ineffable touch of precision to control of the character and you get…a game I'm dying to play.

So I leave 2003 having enjoyed more fantastic games than ever before, more excited for the future than I've ever been. There may have been a year with finer achievements—X-2 sits in the middle of the Final Fantasy series, Fatal Frame II was all I got for horror, even Wind Waker was no Ocarina of Time—but the immense developer talent out there is primed to change the way we look at a video game.

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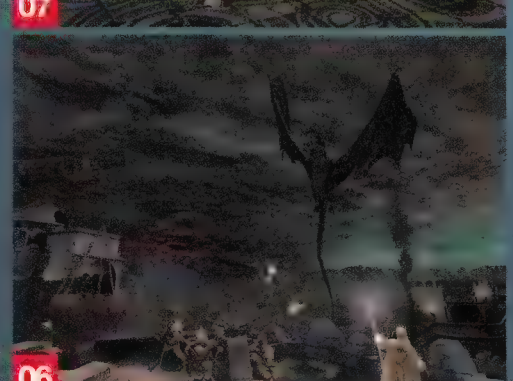
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Personal Top Ten

Jak II
No matter how uneven and disparate the game got, Jak II stunned with an outrageous attention to detail and appealing sensibilities catering to the old-school. Those frantic chase scenes have never been done so well!

Final Fantasy X-2
Square takes the Final Fantasy series where no one thought to go. Not what I'd choose, but I quickly surrendered to the quirky energy and unrivaled battle system.

NBA Street Vol. 2
Sports games were better than ever this year, and what better way to shake up the basketball arena than with an extreme shot of adrenaline: infectious hip-hop, incredible moves, kick-ass style. NBA Street Vol. 2 played brilliantly too.

Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow
If this weren't a handheld, Aria of Sorrow could have been right up there with Symphony of the Night in its effect. Sticking with what had made the Castlevania series my favorite, the game dipped in to the rich pool of familiar gameplay ideas and Gothic mood while extracting a few valuable new twists.

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King
This one will continue to be written off as a shallow action title using its dazzling presentation of striking movie-inspired set pieces populated with numbing amounts of enemy forces to carry the load. No matter. The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King may have required an unrelenting reliance on pounding out a few general projectile and blade-wielding attacks, but every step was harrowing, every cut of the weapon felt in the gut. There was a rhythm and brutality to it all that thrilled the senses. So captivating was the epic wall of scripted activity built around the gameplay path, it's easy to miss the finer points of the game.

Mario Kart: Double Dash!!
I had more multiplayer fun with Mario Kart: Double Dash!!

than any game this year, and I'm still taking it through the rounds in single-player. All the distinct touches from Mario Kart 64 have been rightfully preserved; the battle mode will never grow old. Nor will getting blasted with a red shell. Or hearing the characters cry out in their unique voices as they spin out on a giant banana. Or powersliding around obstacles at just the right moment. Or delighting in the Nintendo's iconic aesthetic spilled all over the tracks.

04 Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

If the makers of Prince of Persia admitted finding inspiration in Ico, it would come as no surprise. To mention Ico in the same paragraph leaves little higher praise. This marvelously spirited, gorgeously rendered, [illegible] appealed to me especially on a personal level, offering so much of what I like most in a game. The elaborate palace setting was awesome, and [illegible] of networked platforming and [illegible] combined for a potent parliament of the modulation of pace, play, story and effect of [illegible] was gauged with razor-sharp eye. A [illegible] achievement.

03 Beyond Good & Evil

[illegible] artistry and delight for the eyes, no game [illegible]hed Beyond Good & Evil. Rayman creator Michel [illegible] poured a lifetime of [illegible] talents to this [illegible] of a masterpiece, stumbling mostly in a few technical mires and an underdeveloped world. What I loved about this game more than anything was its exciting flair for the cinematic. I fell in love with what the game was showing me as much as what I needed to do to reveal the endless visual miracles. And how can I not mention the subtle emotion placed on the storytelling? The admirable simplicity of play? The evocative, standard-elevating score aiding the beautiful images? These guys will continue to grow and learn; their crowning work is sure to come.

02 Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando

As much as I enjoyed the original Ratchet & Clank, there's no denying the unexpectedly superior outcome of this sprawling sequel. Insomniac continued to run tall with their penchant for blithe humor and energetic, playful designs, creating a game that packed genuine laughs in with the seriously intense weapons-driven combat. Technically impressive and huge in scope, properly challenging and expertly balanced, Going Commando was the kind of game that showcased gamemakers at the top of their craft. Perhaps you can learn this, but you can't teach the spirit and charm that finally makes this game a modern classic. Evolving Ratchet and his consistently growing inventory with the cleverly implemented role-playing component was an unexpected treat that carried the game to even higher ground.

The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker

Say what you will about Nintendo's choice to present Link as a precocious child and risk alienation with a dramatically understated visual style—it all sparkled with that ineffable Nintendo charm, effortlessly showing up every other game around it. I played this masterfully designed adventure with a growing appreciation for the purity of its gameplay, the scenarios that made me think, smile, sweat and stare in wide-eyed wonder. How amazing the way Nintendo invested emotion in the inhabitants of the land, the way the enemy seemed alive—so much more than checkpoints of conflict. Everything about this game captivated me, and I felt an emotional connection to its visions as well as its clever tasks; simply slicing the ropes of a suspension bridge to drop to the floor below was more invigorating than 10 ordinary games. There may have been flashier games this year, games that hit with a stronger edge, but nothing exhibited Wind Waker's level of precious imagination and towering craft.

Staff View

Chris Hoffman
Senior Editor

"We always expect the holiday season to be great, but games released in the first six months...were some of the very best of the year."

2003 wasn't what I'd call a "big deal" year. There were no new hardware releases, no standard-setting games that promised to forever alter the industry. 2003 was more a year of subtlety, yet one still of note, as a number of occurrences stood out in my mind.

Cheers... to a fantastic first half of the 2003. We always expect the holiday season to be great, but games released in the first six months, such as Zelda, Xenosaga, Zone of the Enders, The 2nd Runner, Ikaruga, Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow and Mega Man & Bass, were some of the very best of the year.

Bravo...to new mascot-minded games like Viewtiful Joe, Voodoo Vince and even the hopelessly underappreciated Billy Hatcher. These guys are the heart of this industry.

Polite applause... to Nintendo, sticking to their roots and making great games like Mario Kart and Zelda, yet failing to give gamers what they want—namely online play and a diverse library of titles. As much as I personally like the Cube, this feels like the second strike in a row, so they better have a home run ready for their next swing.

Jeers... to Sony's iron fist, preventing quality, classically styled games from being released in the U.S. They already have total domination over the industry, so what's the harm in allowing some old-school gaming into the mix, especially when many of the titles are so darn good? Jeers to Spike TV while I'm at it.

Trepidation... for the industry as a whole, as I worry that more developers will try to increase sales through shock factor and America's seemingly insatiable bloodlust.

Delight... in 2003 as a whole; eager anticipation as we move into 2004, where new console announcements, the exciting PSP and games like Metal Gear Solid 3 and Resident Evil 4 await.

Personal Top Ten

Mario Kart: Double Dash!!
Racing games really are not my forte, but even I fell completely in love with the latest version of Mario Kart. The course designs, the most important aspect of a racing game in my opinion, are simply top-notch; combined with innate fun of kart racing, a classic cast of characters, excellent (if cheap) weapons and the charming Mario appeal, Mario Kart: Double Dash!! is an absolute blast to play. Some may say it's not that different from the last Mario Kart game, but why mess with success?

WWE SmackDown!: Here Comes The Pain
When it comes to wrestling games, the SmackDown series reigns supreme as champion. After taking the series to new heights with the previous version, Here Comes The Pain improved many aspects with new match types, a redesigned grapple system, a better season mode, legend characters and some of the most stunning visuals yet seen on PS2. Had the game featured audio commentary and a more balanced character roster, this game would have ranked even higher on my list.

Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando
Not content with just a minor update to last year's spectacular game, Insomniac have used their time wisely and assertively managed to cram a load of changes and enhancements into the sequel's production cycle. More weapons and new ways to upgrade them, an experience system, bigger & better minigames and more all contributed to make Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando one of the year's very best. Perhaps they went overboard upping the challenge, but that's hardly a distractor.

Mega Man & Bass
Few series are as endearing or enduring as Mega Man, and for good reason. Mega Man & Bass goes back to the series' roots, conjuring up all of the trademark Mega Man goodness: flawless controls, cartoon-like visuals, great level design, complete with bottomless pits, disappearing platforms and instant-death spikes, those wacky robot masters and the nifty weapons that go with them. Getting to play as Bass was a neat too. Hopefully this won't the last we've seen of the original incarnation of Mega Man.

Viewtiful Joe
Talk about style. Between Viewtiful Joe and Devil May Cry, I think Capcom absolutely has a look on "cool" as far as video games are concerned. Furthermore, Capcom have proven not only that 2-D games can be inventive on the current generation of consoles, but that there's still a lot of room left for innovation. Joe's FX powers are a fantastic gameplay hook, put to incredibly creative use throughout the course of the adventure. A big thanks go out to Capcom for taking a risk with such a unique title.

Final Fantasy X-2
Final Fantasy X-2, for me, was a truly breathtaking game—easily one of my favorites of 2001. So when I first heard of X-2, I was both extremely excited and apprehensive; why mess with the formula of such a grandiose RPG? Fortunately, my fears were for naught. As soon as I lay hands on the controller, I knew this was pure Final Fantasy goodness, only bristling with an all-new attitude and sense of adventure. Between the stunning character designs, great story, classic elements (like the active-time battles) and new features, an incredible new chapter in the FF saga has been born.

Xenosaga Episode 1: Der Wille zur Macht
Xenosaga is a game that affected me in all the right ways. Not only is it simply beautiful to look at in terms of both its luscious CG and real-time visuals, but it also has a thought-provoking story, a great cast of likable (and despicable) characters and some of the deepest, most challenging RPG gameplay that I've recently encountered. For me, Xenosaga also holds the honor of having the best soundtrack of 2003, thanks to the magical compositions of Yasunori Mitsuda. I can't wait to play Episode II.

Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg
Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg represents everything that is right about video gaming. Pure, creative, playful fun is what Yuji Naka's latest baby is all about, reminding me what makes this hobby of ours so great. It's a brilliant new take on platforming, with mechanics at work that are sheer genius: balancing orbits and flattening foes are so simple, yet so satisfying. The variety and sheer wackiness of it all (egged on by the game's incredible, colorful visual aesthetic, and the music will get into your head and never leave.

Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow
The fact that this entry in the Castlevania series, not made Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow any less of an awesome experience. It's even better than its console-system Castlevania: Lament of Innocence (which is an awesome game in its own right). The visuals, sound, overall presentation and mechanics are excellent, as expected, but it was the new soul collection aspect of play that really made Aria stand out. Scour or sales foes, absorb the souls, level-up, access to new TEC powers and great powers from them, repeat to play the game for hours on end. It's an addictive, addictive cycle.

01 The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker
I can honestly say there's not a single aspect of the latest Legend of Zelda game that I did not thoroughly enjoy. The combat, the dungeon design, the various tools that Link acquires and, yes, even sailing over the open seas held me constantly spellbound. While I had my doubts about Link's new look, after seeing the game in action, the stylized charm of the cel-shaded graphics quickly won me over. For me, The Wind Waker is even better than the superlative Ocarina of Time, thanks to an improved camera and a fantastic story. A game not to be missed, Wind Waker is the closest I've experienced to perfection this year.

"With all three consoles reaching some kind of maturity, one expects this level of consistency."

Michael Hobbs
Art Director

While Zelda was, in my opinion, the only game this year to approach classic status, there were a lot of good games in every genre. With all three consoles reaching some kind of maturity, one expects this level of consistency.

So my thoughts drift to the next generation of console. We should learn quite a lot this year as to the shape of the coming wave of super-machines, and I wonder just what we are in for. It goes without saying that the graphic capabilities will be some measure better than what we have today, but what I am most curious about is how will the gaming experience change, if at all? I think I can safely assume that we will still be using an analog and pressure-sensitive handset to control the games, so what can we do that we aren't doing now with gameplay?

My guess is that we will see not so many new ideas. Rather, the trend I think will be for more and more realism, and this will guide the gameplay. Things are going to start looking real, so characters will have to move and interact with the environment in far more exacting and intricate ways. Surely this will affect the way games are designed and played.

Which leads me to wonder where this is going to leave Nintendo. Though I have always loved their work more than that of any other game developer, the writing seems to be on the wall for their brand of bright, cute and brilliant games. They have admitted as much. Certainly they feel they need to do something to claw back the market share that they have hemmoraged since the days of the SNES, but Sony is simply ruling everything right now and will no doubt continue to do so. If people don't want games like Mario and Zelda in the numbers that they used to, what is Nintendo to do? They have the talent to make a great game in any style, I think, but will their hearts be in it? How much will they have to concede to market demands? I am dying to find out.

So in summary, 2003 was a pretty good year for games.

Personal Top Ten

SOCOM II: U.S. Navy SEALS
This, in my opinion, is the most entertaining online console game available today. Very well designed and very fun to play. SOCOM is pretty much total action with hard-nosed tactics for heady addictive results.

Final Fantasy X-2
I heard the term "soft core porn" applied to this game. I see the merchandising in the unfortunate use of fetishes, but I also see a great game here. A wonderful and exciting battle system and typically astronomical Square production values elevate this initially bright and silly game to new heights.

Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg
I loved this game. I loved the moments of controlled chaos that were pure Sonic Team. It was some of the most creative action I played this year. I just wonder why a game about a little boy in a chicken suit didn't sell better.

Super Mario Advance 4: Super Mario Bros. 3
I thought twice about putting this game on the list, as it's far from new, but what the hell. This is one of my favorite games of all time, and now I can play it on the super-cool GBA SP. I've got to take this thing back in time to my young self and blow my own mind.

Castlevania: Lament of Innocence
Sure, sure, this wasn't Symphony of the Night in 3D, but Castlevania: Lament of Innocence still offered up a lot of great action and an absolutely superb presentation featuring some of my favorite textures and music of that year.

Panzer Dragoon Orta
There was a time when I thought this game would never come out. It seemed too good to be true that the great Panzer Dragoon would make a 128-bit return. But it did happen, and the game lived up to my high expectations. First of all, it was gorgeous and imaginative, and the shooting action was tough as nails and full of good design. No question, Smilebit are one of the best teams working today. Pity more people don't notice.

Mario Kart: Double Dash!!
Nintendo did not dissapoint with this sequel. The character switching and special weapons were novel little ideas that added just enough of a spark to keep the familiar feeling fresh. But the familiar was more than up to snuff, with the same sort of multiplayer hilarity and fun that has always ear-marked this series. I also really liked the track designs, each one like their own little fully realized world.

Ikaruga
I love the idea that shooters, especially in Japan, will always sell the same number. There is a built-in audience for the things. Even so, this didn't stop Treasure from going all-out on this awesome-looking shooter. Insane patterns and perfected, supercharged gameplay and graphics brought old-school thrills to the GameCube. I wonder if we will still get games like this on the next generation of systems? Just in case, make sure you don't miss this one.

Final Fantasy XI
Where do I even begin to talk about this game? I won't even tell you how many hours I've logged on this thing (think triple digits), and I have no desire to stop anytime soon. It's evil, this game, evil I tell you. I don't even know if I like it. I just can't stop playing it! All joking aside, it's a beautiful and well designed MMORPG that grabs hold of you and doesn't let go. My character is the best!

The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker
It fascinates me that for all the brilliance in the evolution of Yoot Saxon's graphics, Nintendo settled on the simple story book aesthetic for no other reason than to save time. To develop a game with the sort of graphical style of Ocarina of Time but with GameCube levels of detail would have simply taken too long. They calculated that the market demanded the game sooner and made a business decision. We'll then look at the end result. The game is a minor masterpiece, and they developed a visual style that is far more sophisticated than it looks at first glance. There is so much life and character in the images. And naturally, the game plays like a dream with deeply satisfying dungeons and bosses. It's not the epic journey that Ocarina of Time was, but Wind Waker was certainly magical.

The Transformers

It's over, Prime

Transformers fans probably feel like they've been waiting an eternity for this—a video game based on the original Generation One Transformers, available for current systems, fueled by the power of modern technology and game design. It's been a long time since Mystery Of Convoy hit the Famicom, after all. As further enticement for American Transfans, this game even offers full English dialogue, menus and subtitles, making it one of the most import-friendly games available.

But don't transform and roll out to your import store just yet. Once you get past the quality intro CG featuring your favorite Autobots and Decepticons duking it out, you'll discover that being a robot in disguise ain't all it's cracked up to be. The gameplay, consisting primarily of 3D brawling, is horribly stiff. The simplest commands—moving, punching, firing your rifle—are an awkward, clunky chore, as if no one bothered to playtest the game. There's no way to battle multiple enemies simultaneously; you can't even quickly turn around to fend off that Insecticon that's sticking his foot up your tailpipe. The U.S.-produced Transformers Armada game, even in pre-alpha form, is vastly superior.

Less fans still find themselves drawn to the allure of playing through the separate stories for Autobots and Decepticons, or of controlling popular characters such as Optimus Prime, Megatron, Jazz, Starscream, Bumblebee and more, keep this in mind: the voice acting will send you into a fit of either laughter or rage. Though the voices (all English; there's no Japanese option) are clearly inspired by the original G1 series—Soundwave has a slight semblance of a metallic ring, for example—the slow, goofy, uneven execution makes Resident Evil seem like sheer genius by comparison. Rumor has it that this title was planned for U.S. release until Sony rejected it. For once, I agree with them. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Winkysoft
Publisher: Takara
Available: November 2003 (Japan)

"The simplest commands—moving, punching, firing your rifle—are an awkward, clunky chore..."

*Artwork provided by Dreamwave Productions. Dreamwave is not associated with this game.

The large roster of characters, including the psychotic Colossus, is the game's strongest point.

play anime

Space Pirate Captain Herlock
The Legend Returns

Calling all space pirates

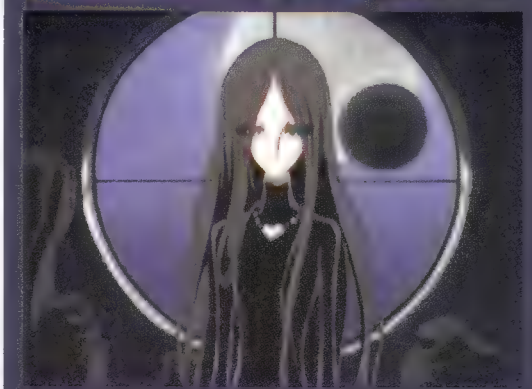
As the first few minutes of the new Captain Herlock streamed by, I sat like a deer in its headlights, transfixed, not caring what was going on. All I could think of was how anything could be so completely alluring. Leiji Matsumoto's ode to space pirates and all of its spin-offs (most notably Queen Emeraldas) have long been among my favorite animated works, but in the hands of Madhouse, afforded this level of production, with character designs by Nobutero Yuuki (whose credits include the Escaflowne and X feature films, as well as Chrono Cross and Secret of Mana for Square), this latest batch of galactic bliss ranks among the best series anime ever produced. It really belongs in theatres; what a pity that most of the film-going public will never lay eyes on it.

Calling Herlock and the Arcadia back into action is no easy task. The era of pirates passing into legend, mankind, no longer threatened by rogues, has developed a firm grasp on the new frontier of space, including a commission to capture and execute anyone who's ever been within earshot of Herlock (including Kei Yuki—the swine!). In doing so, however, much as they did on Earth—recklessly pillaging in the name of progress—the humans have unearthed an evil that predates the cosmos itself...pure chaos. Using the bodies of four dead scientists killed during a deep-space expedition as their conduit, the ancient entity has apparently disintegrated the Earth, kicking off the first leg of their (its?) universal tour, turning world on world to bring about the elimination of all things. A fifth scientist—the sole survivor of the expedition, Professor Daiba—knows what is afoot, but he's got a little problem (in the shape of a big hole in his body), shifting the focus to his troubled, misguided son, Tadashi, now destined to join Herlock.

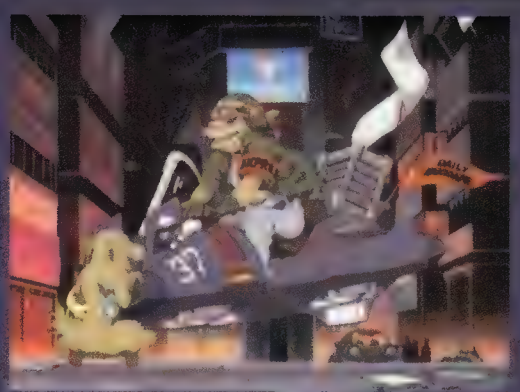
The galaxy needs a savior, Herlock needs a crew, and four episodes pass in the blink of an eye. It's just too damn beautiful. One of the most endearing series in all of anime—Matsumoto's trademark baked-potato heads, skinny legs and long hair have never looked anywhere near this good. To think they're going to keep it up for 13 episodes makes me quiver with anticipation.

Dave Halverson A

Studio: Geneon/Pioneer Entertainment
Rating: 13 & Up
Running Time: 100 Minutes
Volume: 1



"...this latest batch of galactic bliss ranks among the best series anime ever produced."



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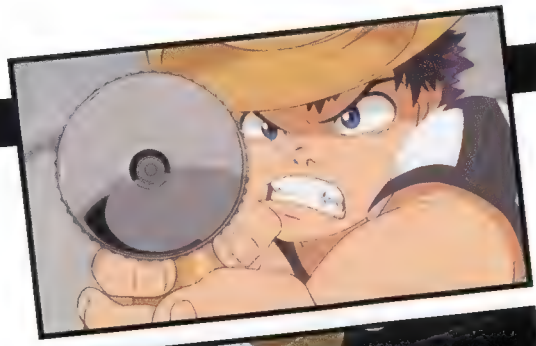
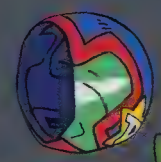
Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi

The wizard of odd

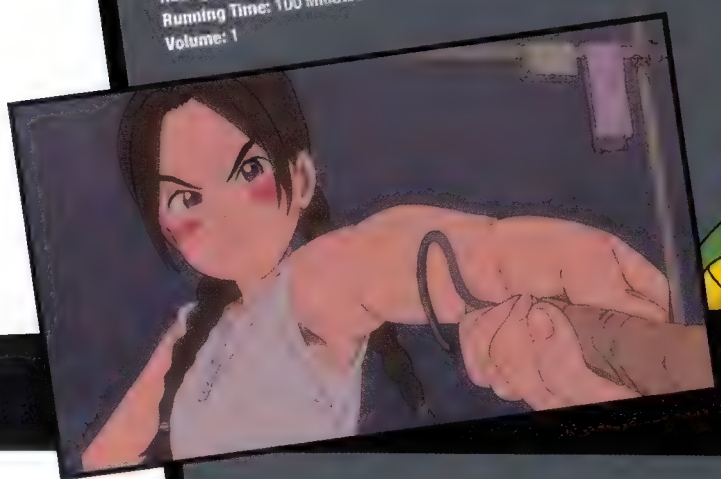




Based on the director of Neon Genesis Evangelion—the world's most thought provoking anime of any kind)—Gainax seem content producing the polar opposite, from the sheer madness and folly of FLCL to this wonderfully surreal bit of high-concept kawaii. To say that Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi is cooking with gas is an understatement; it's more like pyro-shoot incarnate, dripping with as much unique style it makes the American equivalent, CJ7, or otherwise, look drab in comparison. You really have to look to Japan for the level of animated entertainment, you also need to be quite screwed yourself if you can't let your inner-wild child out to play. Now watch Hiro again and leave this to the rest of us.

Abenobashi begins as a typical coming-of-age story as the huge shopping arcade, a world of its own, haven't By its colorful patrons, faces extinction. On its last legs as modern Osaka envelops its quaint boom-air shops and Asense. Two 12-year olds, Arumi and Sasshi, are facing their last summer together in the only home they've ever known. Arumi's family is closing their restaurant (one of the last to move on and moving far away, and Sasshi's family uprooted and moved close by, while he was at camp. Seems innocent enough... a sort of coming-of-age drama. How sweet...now! So very not! Swept away into the Osaka equivalent of Oz, things quickly spiral out of control—a cornucopia of derelict behavior, sexual innuendo and extreme excess. The blue pill? Ha! They took a handful. Hard on right! The first permutation—Abenobashi Sword and Sorcery Shopping Arcade—reveals the killer twist. It's all a big video game! Gainax have set the entire world up as an massive action-RPG...one completely I'd go-beyond-belief action-RPG, complete with standard BGM, items, bosses, the works. Sasshi's first turn-based battle is with a slut, their first magic item (which Arumi loses their entire sub- ject out is a charm for boob inflation, and when they defeat their final behemoth boss (with a rubber sword, no less), it gets all goblin after goblin sends them to oblivion after dizzying dimensions: Abenobashi Great Milky Way Shopping Arcade...Abenobashi Hong Kong Combat Shopping Arcade...The battle from Evangelion is that of the New Style to Dragon Ball Z, re-played and the comedy was bursting, including the single best cringing sequence of all time. We're not worthy. Really, we're not. Forget it. Gainax are gods. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 17 & Up
Running Time: 100 Minutes
Volume: 1



"....a cornucopia of derelict behavior, sexual innuendo and extreme excess."

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Yukikaze

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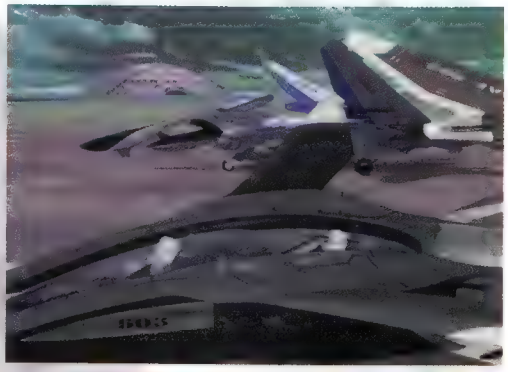

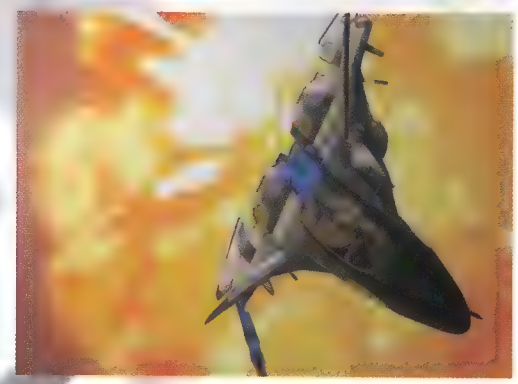

Exquisitely produced and almost too beautiful to describe, Yukikaze has just soared past Macross Plus to slip beside Wings of Honneamise at the apex of aeronautic animation. Gonzo Digimation's CGI—the rendered equivalent to the hand-animated majesty of Wings—is a testament to modern technique and the studio's passion for detail, evidenced by the extensive extras which chronicle the entire team's pilgrimage to Japan's Air Self-Defense Force, where they studied every aspect of fighter jets before tackling the daunting task of moving modern aviation into a hyper-realistic future realm where advanced fighter jets protect the Earth from a resurgent alien menace. The story, a somber, introspective tug of war between human nature and the god-like acumen of AI, is interrupted only by sheer aerial bliss awash with the most amazing colors I've ever seen in any film of any kind as we're treated to what can only be described as poetry in motion...at mach speed.

Taking place 33 years after an alien race called The Jam opened an inter-dimensional gate between the worlds to invade the Earth, the Unified Forces of Earth were able to drive them back from wherice they came (a planet known as Fairy), but the war wages on for the SAF (Special Air Force), charged with keeping them at bay. The enemy is a cunning one; so much so that they can copy our reality in virtual space and perhaps even infiltrate our forces right under our noses, all of which is served up among mechanical designs and a marriage of animation and CGI that truly raises the bar. As the plot thickens, Rei Fukai (the series' Maverick to multiple Gooses) and the Yukikaze's almost sentient systems merge ever closer, a gap bridged only by the mettle of one man: his commander, James Bukhar. With a fantastic story and visually arresting blending of techniques, Yukikaze is absolutely required viewing, anime fan or not. A masterpiece is born. **Dave Halverson A**

Studio: Bandai Entertainment
Rating: 13 & Up
Running Time: 75 Minutes
Volume: 1

"With a fantastic story and visually arresting blending of techniques, Yukikaze is absolutely required viewing..."

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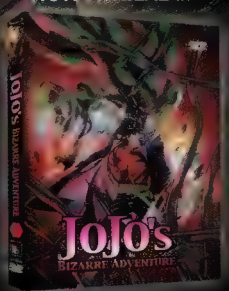

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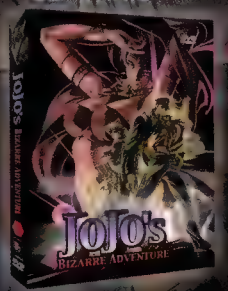

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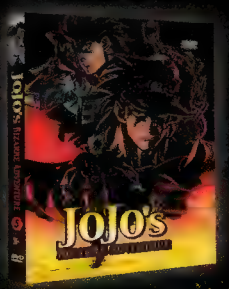

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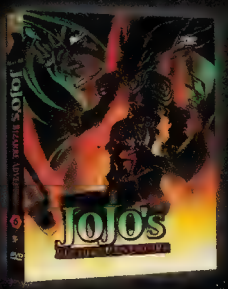

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Legend Of The Mystical Ninja: Goemon The Good

From Edo with love

How ironic that after over a decade of mostly great, mostly underrated games (and, more recently, Sony's denial of Working Designs' release of Konami's hella cool PS2 Goemon game), we're finally seeing the Toonami-friendly anime series that may well have catapulted the Japanese mainstay into the throes of American pop culture where it belongs. Perhaps it's time for WD to resubmit, because Goemon, Ebisumaru, Yae, Sasuke and the entire posse have debuted on ADV DVD, full video game camp (and then some) in tow. While the mention of ADV and "game related" conjures mixed feelings (thus far the score card reads Tekken, PowerStone and Mega Man: poop to poor; Panzer Dragoon, Orphen and Arc the Lad: fair to good; and Wild Arms, Sonic the Hedgehog, Sakura Wars, SiN and ZOE: good to great), I don't see anyone else supporting the game strain, and when it comes to delivering a polished product, they do chicken right. Legend of the Mystical Ninja, while not beautiful in terms of production, is among their best yet, ranking among the higher echelons of TV quality, yet aspiring to a higher plane through its real world set-up, in which Makuamuuge, evil overlord of the video game world, sends his minion Seppukumaru (along with four egg-shaped freaks called Sujigiri) into the material realm to seriously roust and ultimately enslave human kind. Sounds innocent enough...only Seppukumaru's hobby is ritual suicide, the Sujigiri are indescribably f'd up, and pretty much all of the peculiarity attributed to the Goemon games is in here, from Ebisumaru's mere existence to Impact, the team's giant roller-skating robot. I swear, if I hear "pu-las-u-ma!" I'm gonna throw a party in ADV's honor. Even the humans are cool: Tsukasa (the pre-teen protagonist through whose TV Goemon shimmies to take on Sepp) comes complete with a pre-pubescent puppy-love interest and a Ritchie Rich rival; his dad is put in charge of a special police task force to deal with the new virtual threat; and his mom is the most free wheelin' and suitably dim-witted since Jimmy Neutron's. Sure, the episodes are ready-made (peace, peril, showdown, ritual suicide, moral of the story), but canned fun rarely tastes this good. **Dave Halverson B**

Studio ADV Films
Rating 13 & Up
Running Time 125 Minutes
Volume 1

"...Seppukumaru's hobby is ritual suicide..."

"...a highly polished mixture of fantasy, comedy and science fiction..."

Pretear

Sowing the seeds of evil

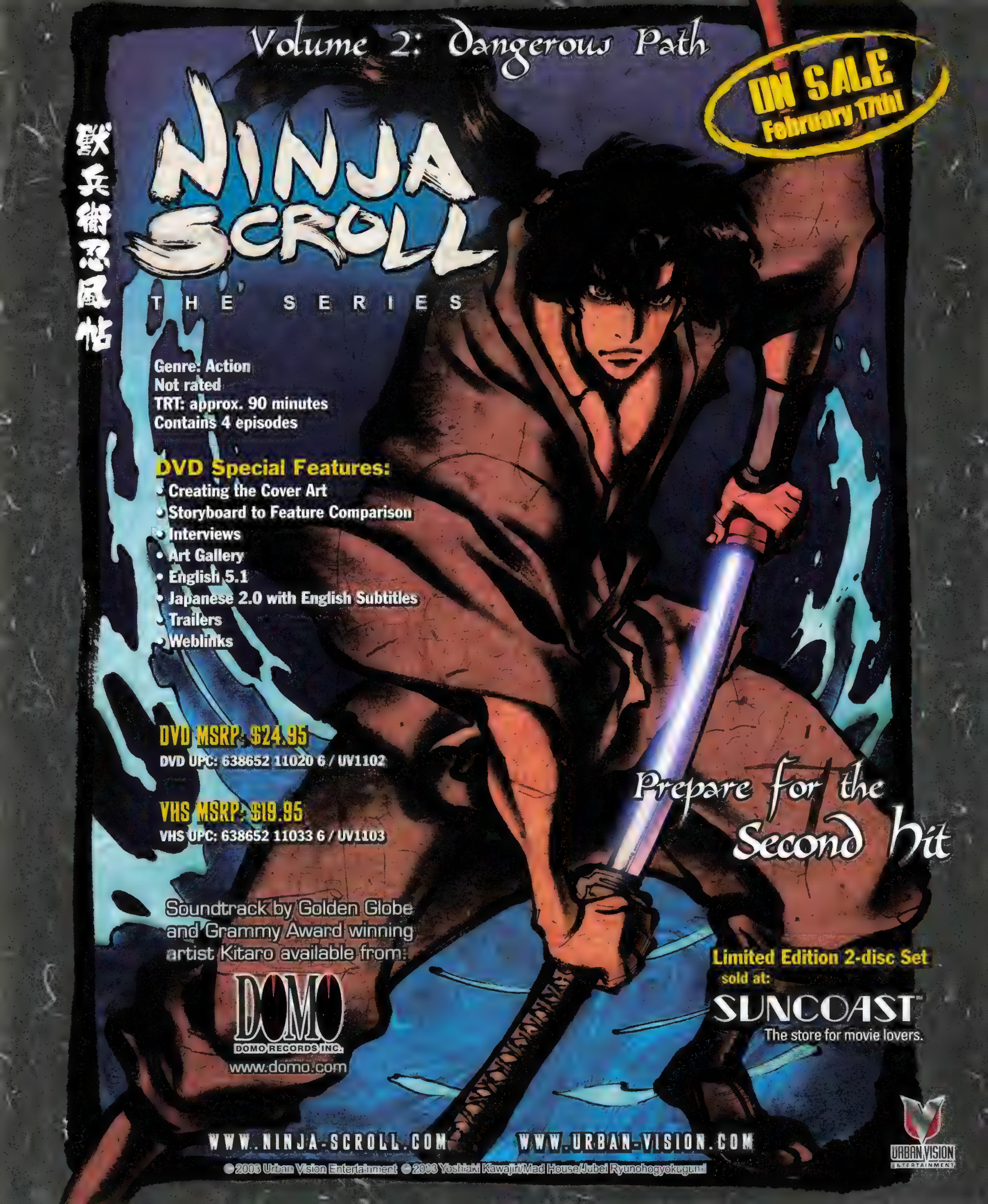
Throw Blue Seed, Cinderella, Snow White, Psychic Force and X into the anime blender and the pinkish green mixture might look something like Pretear—a beautifully executed mish-mash of concepts presented in a refreshing new light. On the material plain we have Himeno Awayuki, a newly rich high-school square peg with a penchant for horticulture, and her dad, a struggling, aloof novelist with Shaggy-like charm who's recently married into money...big money. And on the ethereal side we have the Leafe Knights, seven boys-to-men who live among us, assigned with the task of keeping an eye on the world's Leafe essence, that which sustains life in the universe (yeah, yeah, go ahead, laugh it up).

Thwarting the Princess of Disaster, Phnral, who escapes from the realm of Leafeania and begins seeding Tokyo with demon larva in order suck all of the Leafe force out of the world, is these guys' Olympics, but they need to find the Pretear to synch with in order to battle her botanical spawn. Enter Himeno, who is battling a few demons of her own, first and foremost her two new stepsisters Mayune and Mawata—über-bitch and troubled shut-in respectively.

The all-male Leafe Knights are a sorted bunch if there's ever been one. From Hayate, the brooding leader, to Kei, a cross-dresser so brimming with fruitiness the Queer Guys would go blind, each of the seven controls an element that, when synched with Himeno, allows her to locate and strike the demon larvae's weak spots as they battle it out within containment fields (much like X's) hidden from the public eye. Essentially, she's their instrument of destruction. The twist is that any injury sustained in battle only effects the Knight, adding an uneasy sense of guilt and urgency to the proceedings. Between Himeno's personal life (dealing with her mother's death, her new siblings and a student body who sees her as the daughter of a gold digger) and training for naked transformation with seven different male partners, Himeno's predicament is as twisted as the garden of freaks she's fighting; and we get to watch.

Nowhere near as fruity as I feared, Pretear is a highly polished mixture of fantasy, comedy and science fiction, poised to easily surpass the fertile ground laid by the likes of Blue Seed. One word of warning though: ADV have taken a rare stab at an actual behind-the-scenes for Pretear, but unfortunately, unlike Steel Angels', which was pretty cool, this one is a real head-scratcher, filmed in front of an empty wall (save for one freshly Scotch-taped little poster). For a lesser outfit, this might pass, but an organization as illustrious as ADV should think twice before they let fly anything as proletarian as this. **Dave Halverson B+**

Studio ADV Films
Rating 15 & Up
Running Time 100 Minutes
Volume 1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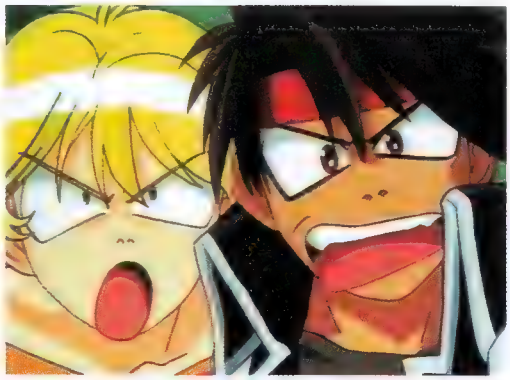
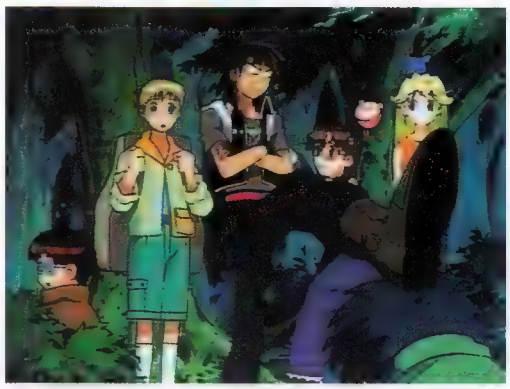
Orphen 2: Revenge

Hocus pocus a bit more focused

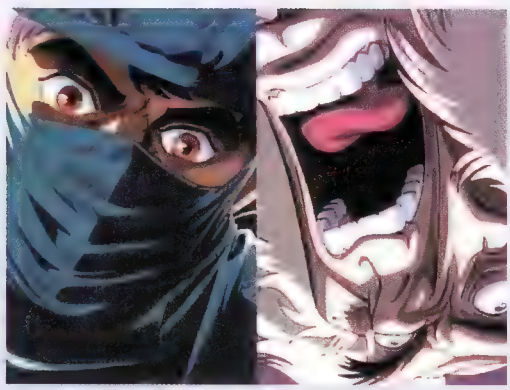
Yes, Orphen is back. Why, you ask? I'm still pondering that one myself. After a mediocre PS2 debut and an initial anime series that redefined continuity problems, it's a wonder it's spawned a sequel, but who's complaining? The series has awesome potential. The players, subject matter and especially character designs are all top notch...if only someone would take the time to cultivate them all. Perhaps it will all come together in a second game, because while not bad, Orphen Season 2 shows early warning signs signaling more of the same continuity problems, as the art style changes once again from scene to scene—as strange a phenomena as the plotlines themselves. The initial quest, sorting out the discord at Orphen's version of Hogwarts—the Tower of Fang, now a fading memory—we find Majic, Cleao, her super-pet Leki and Orphen living together in disharmony, setting out on more episodic fare accompanied by new sidekick Licoris, pursued by his tenacious trollness Lord Volkan and his lackey Dortin. Licoris, a member of the Royal Public Order of Knighthoods Unified Management Headquarters Third Strategic Control Room working for the Division of Secret Information as a B Class Special Task Official reporting to the Liaison Department of the Defense Program, along with her floating, Kirby-like salt-water-taffy-pooping robo-orb, provides the funds for the new exploits, which, as you've likely gathered, weigh in on the comedic side over the first series' often brooding scenarios. Hot springs, possessed cross-dressing trolls and exploding bedfellows can be yours. Let's hope this one sizzles where the last series fizzled. **Dave Halverson C+**

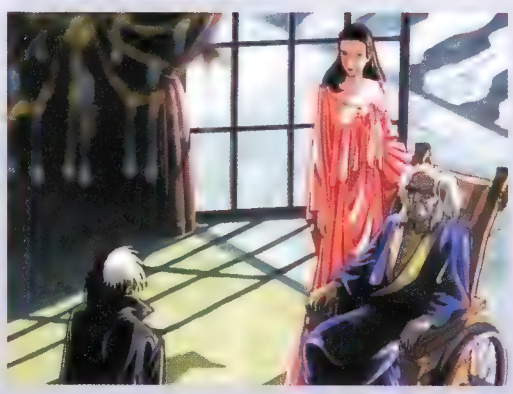
Studio ADV Films
Rating 15 & Up
Running Time 100 Minutes
Volume 1





"Let's hope this one sizzles where the last series fizzled."





"...he's essentially a phantom with a scalpel...imagine the practice he could have in Beverly Hills."

Black Jack: Infection

Doctor Feelgood

Brought to life by the renowned creator of Astro Boy and Metropolis, Osamu Tezuka, Black Jack Infection was given the royal treatment back in 1993 to the extent that the decade-old production doesn't look a day over, say, three—when things began to really go digital. Unlike our own CSI (and let's not forget Quincy!), in anime's sole medical thriller (now there's an oxymoron), Black Jack does his thing before the bodies grow cold—a rogue physician with mad skills brought in when all else fails, or as he deems the situation and/or payment worthy of his attention. Part super surgeon, part Jesus Christ, part Don Juan and part super freak, he's essentially a phantom with a scalpel...imagine the practice he could have in Beverly Hills.

Following its movie debut on Manga DVD back in 2001, Infection's two stand-alone episodes cover similar ground. Black Jack's first case takes him to a remote island where a strange disease is sucking a wealthy captain of industry dry, wringing out his body like an old dishrag. The ancient strain of bacteria that causes its victims to wriggle in pain and eventually explode to death like mummy piñatas proves a most formidable opponent, and then it's off to a chance meeting with a group of high school girls who mysteriously begin to meet gruesome ends. Quality animation and slick (for its time) editing abounds in what amounts to 90-plus minutes of solidly captivating anime planted well outside the garden variety.

Why he dresses in turn-of-the-century garb, is sewn together like Frankenstein and lives in Goth central with his forever-young daughter remains a mystery, but one thing is for certain: BJ's the got the medicinal side of anime all sewn up. **Dave Halverson B-**

Studio Central Park Media
Rating 13 & Up
Running Time 99 Minutes
Volume 1

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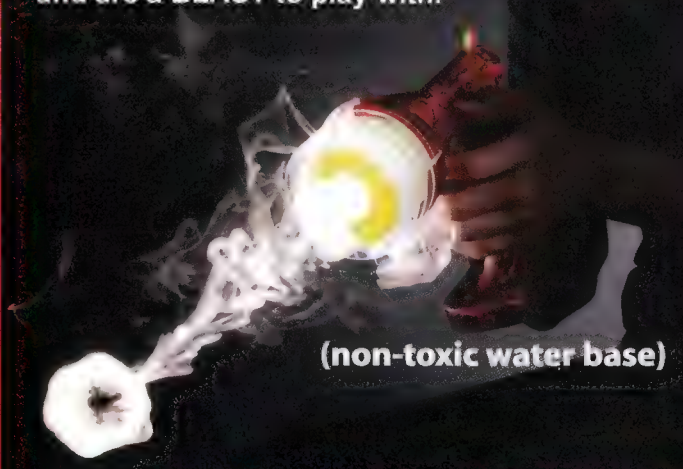

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Infinite Ryvius

Studio: Bandai Entertainment / **Rating:** 13 & Up
Running Time: 125 Minutes / **Volume:** 2

Infinite Ryvius Volume 2's drop in quality is outweighed by its developing story as the 487 stranded teenage cadets continue to struggle with the top-secret interstellar spaceship that's protecting them from the crushing force of the Sea of Geduld and their pursuers, the government that's supposed to be rescuing them. Heading towards Mars airspace, mutiny is afoot, along with the first test of the Vital Guarder, the mysterious battle mech that could prove to be their last hope for survival. **Dave Halverson B**

Witch Hunter Robin

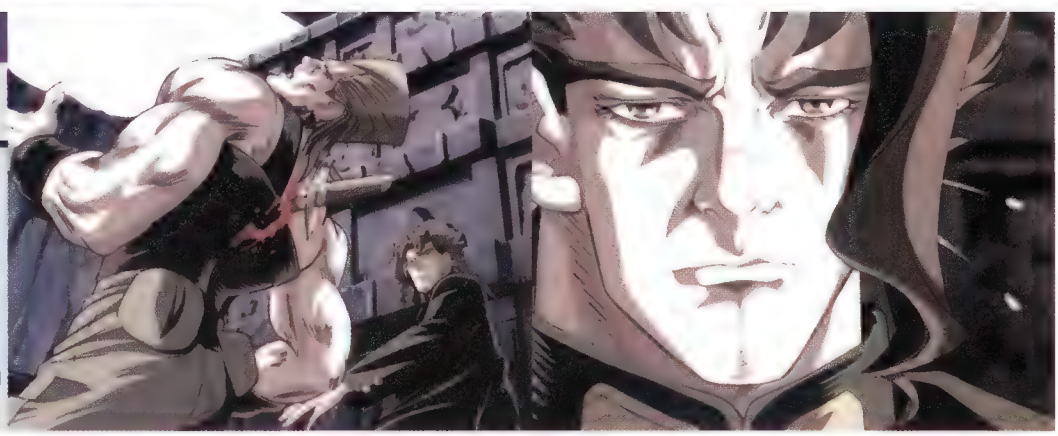
Studio: Bandai Entertainment / **Rating:** 13 & Up
Running Time: 125 Minutes / **Volume:** 2

Robin's ability to harness fire now completely in tune, her trusty steed (that would be a Vespa...when it's got gas) by her side, the series' extensive set-up is now complete, allowing Witch Hunter Robin to focus on matters of the macabre—something it does with astute proficiency. Witches come in all shapes and sizes, and no one is safe—not the populace, perhaps not even the STNJ. Belief is a stellar volume, even better than the first. **Dave Halverson A-**

JoJo's Bizarre Adventure

Studio: Super Techno Arts / **Rating:** 16 & Up
Running Time: 60 Minutes / **Available:** Now

As Jotaro and company set out to find the body snatcher, Dio, Polnareff is lured away from the pilgrimage when the Stand (special powers harnessed by select warriors) that brutally murdered his sister—now in the employ of Dio—makes an opportunistic appearance. Avdol does his best to thwart the impending butchery, but this latest Stand, visible only through reflection, proves a worthy adversary. Iffy animation but a cool (if you like it brutal and extra nasty) plot. **DH B-**



Final Fantasy Unlimited

Studio: ADV Films / **Rating:** 12 & Up
Running Time: 100 Minutes / **Volume:** 2

The world's most monotone kids, Ai and Yu (Ai and Yu may owe you a refund), return in yet another volume written at a 7-year-old level, yet packed with guns and Flash-quality animation barely passable for CGI. Shades of the mighty franchise struggle to pierce the veil of mediocrity—a jingle here, a cool design there—but in the end, FFU is an abysmal failure given its lineage. The games get the big budgets, yet this anime was afforded a pittance; what a shame. Still, I watched all the way through. How pathetic am I? It's that damn intro tune from VII, I tell ya. **DH C**

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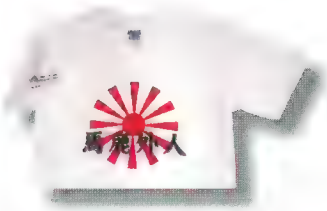

Baka Gaijin. Two words a foreigner living in Japan learns pretty quickly are *baka* (stupid) and *gaijin* (foreigner). We put these words together on a bizarre shirt just for you. Dare to be stupid with this unique Japanese message!

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Beware of Perverts. Men touching women on trains is a big problem in Japan, and there actually are signs that say "Beware of perverts" (*Chikan chui*). Our wacky T-shirt is sure to get you lots of attention, for better or worse. All sizes are in stock for your ordering convenience.

Emergency Exit. If you've ever been to Japan, you've seen the green Emergency Exit signs over every doorway. This is such a unique symbol of the country that we thought we'd capture it on a wacky T-shirt. Universally recognizable by all Japanese, and it looks really cool!

Hoodies and Girls' Shirts. Enjoy our wacky Japanese messages in the colder months with long-sleeved shirts and hoodies, both fashionable and very warm. Also, we have selected shirt designs available in fitted girls' sizes that will enhance all the right lines.

No Tattoos Allowed. In Japanese public baths, there's always a sign stating that customers with tattoos (e.g. yakuza) are not allowed in. We loved this wacky concept so much, we've captured it on a 100% cotton T-shirt for you — guaranteed to set you apart in a crowd!

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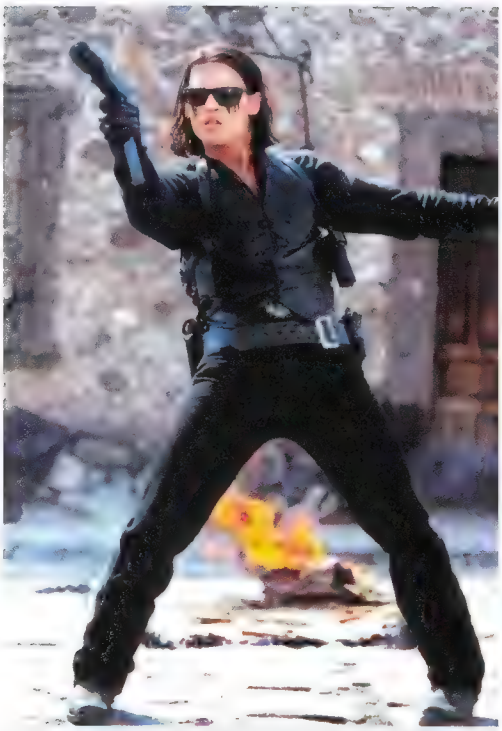


Once Upon a Time In Mexico

Starring: Antonio Banderas, Salma Hayek, Johnny Depp, Mickey Rourke
Director: Robert Rodriguez
Released By: Columbia Tristar
Rated: R

Once Upon a Time In Mexico was some of the most fun I had at the movies last year. It was far from the greatest achievement of the year, but place it on the ballot of tolerable action flicks and you had a big winner. Robert Rodriguez, coming off a similar success with *Spy Kids*, wrote, edited, shot and directed the movie himself, lending it a personal touch that's palpable, graced with a polished B-movie charm. The action is meant to be ludicrous and the story a bit loopy, mostly working because of Rodriguez's energetic touch. And when the movie is looking for even more energy, there's always Johnny Depp working his hilariously eccentric INA agent to quirky perfection. Violent, spirited, amusing and especially well shot within its budget—even a little clever at times—*Once Upon a Time In Mexico* is good fun. Can't say that about much else last year.
Extras: Given the film's auteur leanings, the requisite Rodriguez director commentary becomes especially interesting. Also entertaining are little extras like Why Film Is Dead and other interesting commentaries by Rodriguez. The featurettes, like Ten Minute Flick School and Inside Trouble-maker Studios, are nicely original and hugely informative.
Brady Fiechter
Movie: B DVD: B+

play MEDIA

Matchstick Men

Starring: Nicolas Cage, Sam Rockwell, Alison Lohman
Director: Ridley Scott
Released By: Warner Home Video
Rated: PG-13

In the performance-driven *Matchstick Men*, Ridley Scott transitions from the powerful spectacle of *Gladiator* and *Blackhawk Down* to try his talented hand with a quieter, most unique drama. Nicolas Cage stars strong as a beleaguered LA conman, wanting to get out for good with one last major hit. And oh, what major complications arise: he's neurotic, spiraling as the story winds further into one surprise complication after another. He also discovers the daughter he never knew, a hot-wire eccentric in her own right. She understands him; he loves the company and even starts to take to the mess he normally recoils from in obsessive fear. The play between the two is expected but affecting, taking the movie into tender territory you might not see coming. When *Matchstick Men* simmers to its overwrought climax—enough with the strain for never-seen-it-coming twists already—a hugely entertaining story, professionally told and given vivid mood with Scott's awesome eye for the visual, almost resists the letdown. I wanted more from the talented Scott and the promising depths the story hinted toward, but *Matchstick Men* certainly leaves its mark.
Extras:I'm always down for listening to Ridley Scott on any director commentary, and he's joined by writers Nicholas Griffin Writer and Ted Griffin. But that's all you get.
Brady Fiechter
Movie: B DVD: C

Top Ten DVDs of 2003

No reason to give numbers to the top 10 DVDs of the year—every one is an enormous entertainment on some unique level, from their extras to their collectibility to their place as one of the best overall movies of 2003. Here are the year's absolute must-owns:

Finding Nemo
Visual miracles and a miraculous charm paint the underwater world of Pixar's animated classic—the best selling DVD yet.

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers
You do have the extended edition of Peter Jackson's breathtaking, exquisitely told film, right?

X2
It's rare that the sequel is better than the first, but then this is one of the best ever of the comic-book movies.

Alien Quadrilogy
Too bad David Fincher didn't chime in on Alien 3, but the rest of this giant boxed set is gold.

The Matrix Reloaded
Now you can watch the incredible freeway chase scene over and over, then turn to the huge extras to see how it was all done.

Gangs of New York
Martin Scorsese gets a robust budget and lets his distinct style run wild.

The Adventures of Indiana Jones
We've waited a long time for this, and there's even an extra disc of bonus material to sweeten the deal.

Spirited Away
Miyazaki spins his magical web of wild imagination and soaring playfulness—a film so full of abstract wonder that it really must be seen.

The Animatrix
Some of the shorts were merely very good, others full of visions and a feast for the philosophical mind.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season 4
The legendary TV series lives on in DVD form. Silent episode "Hush" and the dream-bound "Restless" are among the series' best.

Freddy vs. Jason

Starring: Monica Keena, Kelly Rowland, Jason Ritter, Robert Englund
Director: Ronny Yu
Released By: New Line Ent./Warner Bros. Home Video
Rated: R

The more polished the CGI, lighting, set design, cinematography and creature effects, the more fantastical the slasher genre has become, completing its full circle to end up right where it began: with Freddy and Jason. Starring in the ultimate showdown, going claw to cleaver over those crazy kids on Elm Street, all is as it should be. They run, Jason walks, but he always catches up, and Freddy, well, he's got fingers. Yesterday's shock is today's campy fun; a boob shot here, a folded-in-half skewered teen there—this was better than Scream. Whether or not satire was on the drawing board, $82 million in domestic box office can't be wrong. Ronny Yu made this film the only way it could be for today's audience to care, and did so with so much high-tech bravado and panache the end result is the best cartoon violence and over-the-top spewing since the first "Fatality;" a great concept—Freddy sending Jason to Elm Street to jump-start his franchise on fear—brought to ultimate fruition. Monica Keena (a near dead ringer for Britney Murphy), Jason Ritter and Kelly Rowland all deliver fitting performances, and you gotta give it up for the guy channeling Jay (from *Jay & Silent Bob*). The scene with him and the Alice in Wonderland Freddy worm made my day. Fresh meat for a grinder that's been long dormant, someone needs to sick Yu on Hellraiser.
Extras: As saturated with extras as it is fake blood, the featurettes, given the material, are particularly fascinating, as are the interviews with Englund and Kirzinger (Freddy and Jason respectively), although they completely shatter the illusion. I thought Freddy was real man! **Dave Halverson**
Movie: B- DVD: B

House of the Dead

Starring: Jonathan Cherry, Tyron Leitso, Clint Howard, Ona Grauer
Director: Uwe Boll
Released By: Artisan
Rated: R

House of the Dead is an old game about shooting zombies. What I wouldn't give to have been a fly on the wall when they green-flagged this movie, if indeed you want to call this a movie. Never has so much rubber and latex been put to such bad use. I couldn't wait for these idiots to die. Yeah, nice boobs, now run along into the forest and get eaten. To attempt to describe how bad this movie is is much too daunting a task for me; you have to see it. Rent it and refuse to pay...or something. I saw better costumes on Halloween. Zombies now apparently sprint and leap from visible air rams, and the acting...isn't. But worse still...no house!! The castle in the game has been reduced to, like, a two-bedroom fixer-upper. *House of the Dead* makes *Ghosts of Mars* look like *Star Wars*. Hands down the worst film I have ever seen. Someone stop this guy before he puts another wannabe actor on a turntable.
Extras: Does it even matter? The Women of House of the Dead? Please. And liken a special effects featurette for House of the Dead to the Iron Chef showing you how to cook a turd. No matter how you slice it, it's crap!
Dave Halverson
Movie: F DVD: D

Underworld

Starring: Kate Beckinsale, Scott Speedman, Bill Nighy, Michael Sheen
Director: Len Wiseman
Released By: Columbia/Tristar
Rated: R

The sequel wisely green-lit and the worst toy line ever fading from memory, the best thing to come out of Screen Gems since *Girl Fight* is no less than a neo-Gothic breath of fresh air, breathing new life into the severely wanting vampiric and werewolf realms. *Dracula 2000* was a crap sandwich, *Queen of the Damned* an almost, *Blade II* a stake to the heart...but *Underworld* is a wonderfully excessive hardware-heavy good time, steeped in well-laid lore, first rate performances, keen cinematography and luscious atmosphere. Besides great performances by Kate Beckinsale and Scott Speedman, Bill Nighy's Viktor gives us an elder we can (finally) believe in and Michael Sheen does the Lycan leader, Lucian, very proud. Opting for high-tech weaponry over the usual sorted wireworks and effects associated with hand-to-hand combat (the bane of nearly every vampire movie) provides the edge for an otherwise almost masterfully executed universe in which the war between werewolves and vampires is decided—the story of which is surprisingly wrought with twists and turns, best left untold seeing as how you likely avoided the theatrical run due to the usual onslaught of crabby reviewers weaned on Woody Allen movies. Beckinsale in skin-tight black latex is hard to look away from, but be sure to soak in the detail as well—crests, books, hardware, costume design...this was a supremely adept effort given the size of the budget. Coven and Den merged with militia and mob, the stage is set for the ultimate sequel if not a full-blown franchise. Time to line up for *Van Hellsing*, I suppose. Where Kate goes I must now follow.
Extras: Great writer/director commentaries and a wealth of nicely produced featurettes (four to be exact) do well to represent why the film works as well as it does. And where there's neo-Goth there must be Nu Metal. Finch does it up right. **Dave Halverson**
Movie: B DVD: B

Behind the scenes of Devil May Cry

Words Chris Hoffman

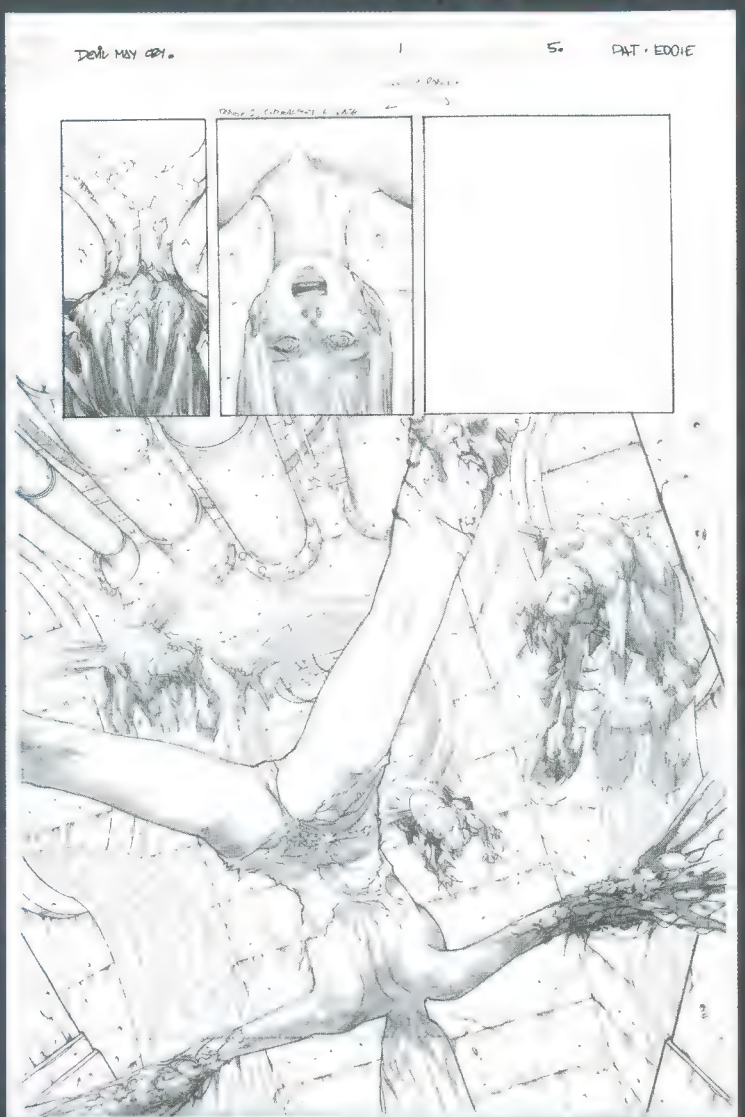
Nothing says "cool" in the video game world like Capcom's Devil May Cry, and soon that coolness will be in a comic book store near you.

Following in the footsteps of Mega Man and Maximo, Devil May Cry is the third in Dreamwave's scheduled quintet of Capcom-based comic books, and it has all the makings to be the best yet. Crafted by the popular duo of writer Brad Mick and artist Pat Lee (fresh off their run on Transformers G1 Vol. 2), the four-issue miniseries is a loose retelling of the first DMC game, in which everyone's favorite half-demonic ass-kicking mercenary, Dante, is sent to investigate the happenings on Mallet Island at the behest of none other than Trish. As expected, all hell breaks loose, wicked action ensues and Dante lays the smack down on characters straight from the game like Phantom and Nelo Angelo. In addition, the series delves deeper into Dante's psyche—just what does it mean to be the son of legendary Dark Knight Sparda?—and his painful past.

With the comic's first issue scheduled for a Feb. 25 debut, we checked in with Dreamwave to see the behind-the-scenes process of how they transform the energy of Devil May Cry into comic-book form, flowing from initial concept to printed page, and what the creative team has to say about their latest endeavor.

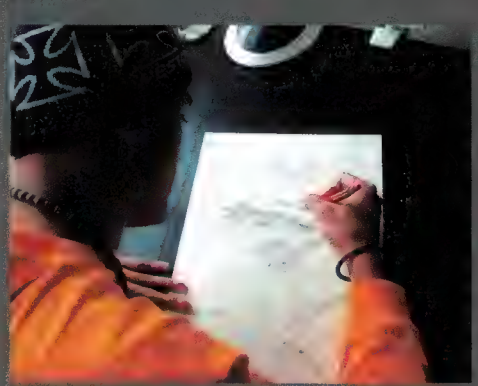
The amazing alternate cover image to Devil May Cry #1, featuring pencils by Michael Turner.

From concept to pencil sketch



According to writer Brad Mick, the creative process starts with content provided by the source material. "That way I can get a better grasp of what makes the basic premise compelling and the characters memorable," explains Mick. "The next step is to figure out how that will translate into the printed page. I'll then fiddle around with sketches, rough plots/scenes and character breakdowns/motivations until things feel right. When I have a tighter idea of the direction that I want to take, I then approach the artists about where they're at visually for the project."

From there, penciler Pat Lee prepares thumbnail sketches to determine the creative use of panels and shots. "We then blow it up on an 11x17" board using a light box," describes Lee. "We sketch out the generic details, at this stage it still looks a little sketchy but tighter than the layout. After that, we use a soft eraser and brush the board gently so that we can get a light pencil layout of the sketch. The art is a collaborative process, with Pat Lee drawing the character art and foreground, then Edwin Garcia adding in extensive background details like architecture and landscapes.



Above: Pencil drawings of DMC #1, pages 4 and 5. Pencils by Pat Lee, backgrounds by Edwin Garcia.

Right: Edwin Garcia adds background elements to page #6 of the first issue of Devil May Cry.

Interview

Brad Mick Writer
Pat Lee Penciler
Thierry Doizon Inker/ Colorist

play. Can you give more details about the Devil May Cry story? When we last spoke, the plan was to have the events in the first DMC game...

...and characters, w...

...We've mostly been seeing a lot of comics involving robots from you lately. How was it dealing with something more...

Final color pages

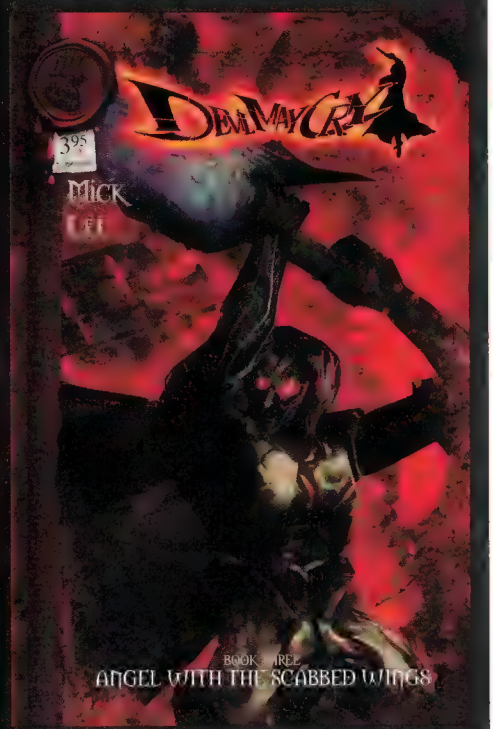
After the pencil drawings are finalized for each page, the next step is getting them colored, a process primarily done on computer. "We then scan it at 300dpi and bring it into Adobe Photoshop and Painter to color render it," Lee says. "There will be some areas in which we will either watercolor or marker render depending on what we are trying to express in the panel." The coloring duties are divided among a team of several people, with the comic's interior pages handled by Thierry Doizon and Linda Bergkvist, and the covers colored by Ramil "Doe" Sunga. The result is the gorgeous, sometimes haunting artwork that winds up on the printed page. The final part of the process, not pictured, is the addition of text boxes and voice bubbles.

These images here represent the final artwork from Devil May Cry #1, pages 4 and 5, with pencils by Pat Lee, colors by Thierry Doizon and backgrounds by Edwin Garcia. Page 4 shows off a smoking, dynamic battle flashback between Dark Knight Sparda and Mundus. Page 5…well, obviously, that's not a position you want to be in when human-eating bugs are about. Yikes.

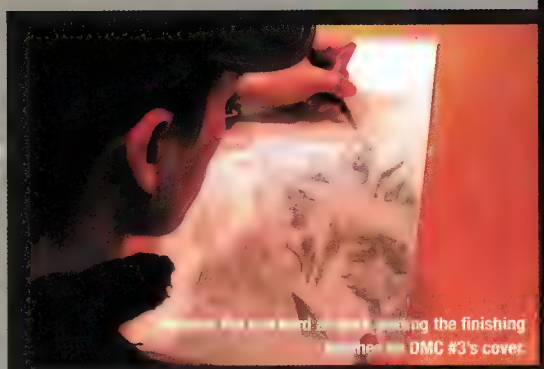
: Ramil "Doe" Sunga uses programs like Photoshop to color the cover to Devil May Cry #2…when he's not eating lunch.

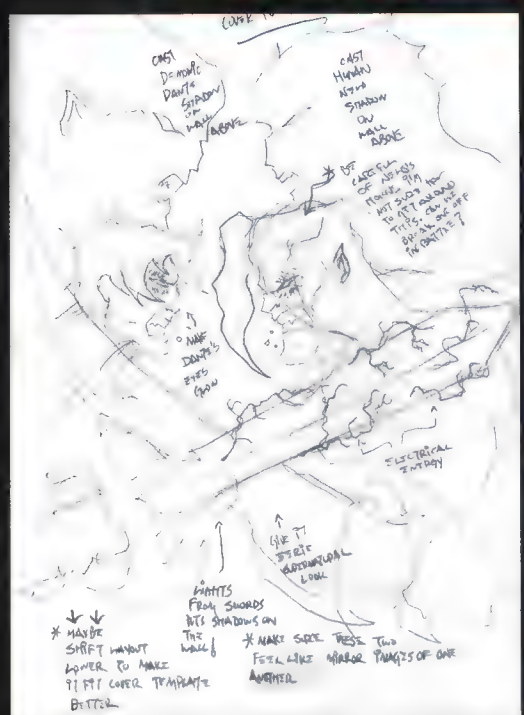
Issue 3 Preview

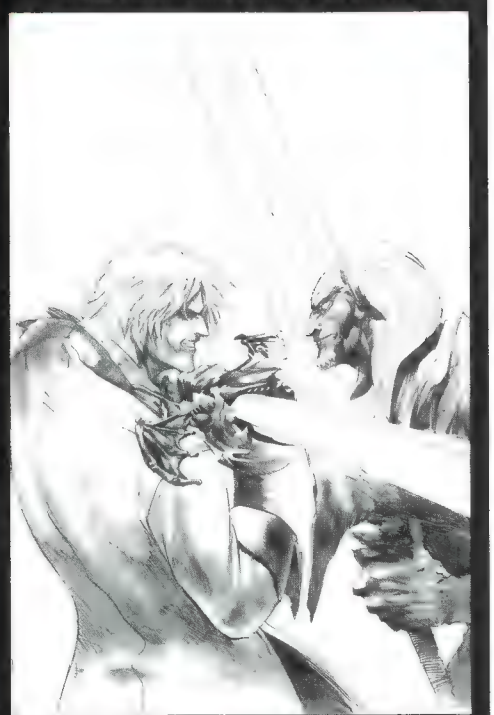
No single piece of art for a given issue is as important as the cover. The artists give it their all to make the cover especially eye-catching, ready to jump off the comic store shelves and into fans' hands. Here's an exclusive sneak preview and behind-the-scenes look at the cover for Devil May Cry #3, scheduled for release in late April.



Above: An alternate, CG-rendered cover to DMC #3. **Below:** The final pencil drawing of the cover of DMC #3. **Above Left:** An original thumbnail concept sketch of the cover of DMC #3.




CAST DEMONIC DANTE SHADOW ON WALL ABOVE
CAST HUMAN NERO SHADOW ON WALL ABOVE
ELECTRICAL ENTITY
LIKE IT STATE
SHIFT WHOLE LOWER TO MAKE 9"1 FF1 COVER TEMPLATE BETTER
MAKE SURE THESE TWO FEEL LIKE MIRROR IMAGES OF ONE ANOTHER



Rock Star Gamers: Korn

Interview Korn's Jonathan Davis

In today's world of sound-bite culture, bands come and go more frequently than ever. Being a success means stringing together a few hits before the band breaks up, ends up in rehab or, worse yet, the listening public moves onto the next big thing. Fan loyalty is an even rarer trait, as people cover up one band's patches, stickers and even tattoos with that of their latest favorite. But one band stands out among the rest as being successful, with over 20 million albums sold, as well as having arguably the most loyal of all fan bases in the industry: Korn. With the recent release of his latest album, Take a Look in the Mirror, under his belt, Korn frontman Jonathan Davis took some time before the holidays to chat with **play** about issues ranging from Ted Bundy to *Star Wars*. **Lucas Mast**

play: So how did you learn how to play the bagpipes?
Davis: (Laughs) I picked up the bagpipes when I was in high school in Bakersfield, California. Everyone needed to learn to play an instrument, and I thought the bagpipes sounded interesting and certainly outside of what everyone else was trying to do. I think there might have been a larger statement in my choice—or maybe I just wanted to play the bagpipes.

How would you characterize your new album, Take a Look in the Mirror?
I think it marks a return to something darker, both lyrically and musically. I think our fans are really going to sink their teeth into it on a number of levels—certainly not something people will confuse with being pop-friendly.

For your new album, you traveled the U.S. on a bus, composing lyrics. What part of the country was most inspiring?
I'd have to say New Orleans gave me the best vibe. There is so much going on in that city, and there is such craziness and darkness that allows for some interesting thinking.

I hear you are a big gamer. What have you been playing lately?
I have so many games, every platform, both on the road and at home, it is unbelievable. Lately, though, I have been hooked on XIII and Rainbow Six, as well as Zelda.

Xbox sponsored your recent tour. How did you hook up with them?
They contacted us because they knew that our fans were their fans and they wanted to do something different, something innovative. We tied it all in together, from playing games against fans on stage to hosting a karaoke contest singing "Freak on a Leash," with the winner taking home an Xbox. I would love to start my own gaming company down the road—or work with one of the major companies on projects.

In your rare instances of downtime, what do you like to do for fun?
Go shoot my guns. I am a gun freak—whether it is target

"It's funny to think about now, but I loved Duran Duran as a kid. But then again, I also loved Pantera—a pretty wide range, I'd have to say."

"This would not be something for the faint of heart—we might need to have one of those warnings like they have with roller coasters."

shooting from 1000 yards or hunting, I can never get enough.

Didn't you just shoot a boar?
Yes—it was amazing! It was the first time I shot another living thing, and to shoot it and watch it lying and kicking and then to watch it bleed out and see people eat what I shot was incredible.

Korn has some of the most renowned fans. What's the nicest thing a fan has done?
I think we are pretty unique among major-label bands in that we involve our fans on every level, from creating our official website to the artwork of the albums to elements in the live shows. The simple gifts that fans give us mean so much to us, but it is hard to top the kids who tell you that your music saved their lives. I have been there and know that music can be powerful.

How many of the sexy alien-looking woman mic stands designed by famed artist HR Geiger exist? Who owns them?
One of them is on tour with us right now. Geiger has two of them, one of which is in his permanent museum. We have an option to do two more at some point in the future, but we have not decided the best time or use for them.

What has been the biggest surprise with your success?
I wake up every day and I am still stunned that I am getting paid to do what I love. I also think that it was a surprise—a pleasant one—that people were receptive to our music, which was something that was not around at the time and took some getting used to.

You have worked with Mack 10 and Ice Cube in the past and Nas is on your new album. Is there a future Korn hip-hop collaboration coming?
Those guys were great to work with and I would love to do more stuff with hip-hop artists should the projects arise.

Is there anyone you would like to work with musically?
I would jump at the chance to work with either Jimmy Page or Robert Plant—they were so instrumental to my music from an early stage.

Who were some of your musical influences growing up?
It's funny to think about now, but I loved Duran Duran as a kid. But then again, I also loved Pantera—a pretty wide range, I'd have to say.

When you finally hit the big time, what was the first thing you splurged on?
That's an easy one. My 1996 Bentley Azure convertible. Everyone immediately thinks, "Oh no. Davis has gone bling-bling hip hop on us." But I love the cars for their craftsmanship. Since they are handmade—the model I bought was one of the last where they did so—everything is done with such attention to detail that it is mind-blowing.

What is going to be the next big thing from Elementree Records?
The Drama. Stay tuned and keep your eyes out for them.

Korn tours pretty heavily. Do you find it hard to balance family and being on the road?
Luckily I have found a wife who can deal with me and shoulder the brunt of the load while I am on the road. Music is my job and it is also what happens to put food on the table, so when I am home I try and make up for any lost time. I also try and bring them out to as many dates as possible.

What are some of your favorite movies?
I really like the *Lord of the Rings* movies. I just saw the most recent one and it was amazing. I tend to like things where there are long storylines—like the *Star Wars* trilogy. *Dune* ranks up there as one of my favorites—most people thought it sucked, but the way everything was presented visually was stunning. Then there is the other side of me that likes darker movies like *Phantasm*, *Salem's Lot*, *The Exorcist* and the like.

Do you collect anything?
I collect a lot of things that deal with darkness and death. I have Ted Bundy's VW, shrunken heads, serial killer art, evidence from some famous gruesome court cases. It's funny, but when word gets out that you collect this sort of stuff, people come out of the woodwork with some crazy stuff.

You have done a lot in your career across many different mediums. Is there anything you have not done yet?
Something I am going to do—once I have a block of free time—is to realize my dream of creating and scoring a dark and twisted musical, where Clive Barker and Stan Winston would provide the writing and the backdrops and props. This would not be something for the faint of heart—we might need to have one of those warnings like they have with roller coasters.

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Sony Ericsson P900

http://www.sonyericsson.com — Price: $999

Without beating around the bush, I'll just say it. I love this phone. Sure, it may have its little quirks, but for the most part, Sony Ericsson's latest smartphone should really be called a "dreamphone." Under the hood is a 156MHz ARM9 processor with 16MB of RAM. What's cool is that the P900 comes with a 32MB Memory Stick Duo (there are 128 cards out there) so it brings the memory total to a whopping 48MB. The display is simply massive. Supporting 16-bit color and resolutions of 208X320 pixels, whether you're reading email or watching videos, this screen certainly does the trick. The five-way jog dial allows users to easily and quickly access contacts, start applications and scroll through text. Synching with your desktop is a no brainer and the included USB cradle/charger makes it all pretty painless. The P900 also has a built-in camera. Although the camera maxes out at 640X480, the picture quality is perfect for emails and MMS messaging. The built-in video player supports MPEG4 playback with surprisingly decent framerates. Other features include built-in Bluetooth, a music player that plays MP3s and WMA files, a speakerphone and fantastic battery life. Oh yeah, it makes phone calls too. **Tom Ham**

Apple iPod mini

www.apple.com/ipodmini — Price: $249

As if the iPod couldn't get any cooler, Apple has managed to shrink their HD-based music player (shown actual size below). The new iPod mini comes in five colors of anodized aluminum and has an outer dimension of just 2"x 3.6". It features a new click wheel interface, where the controls are actually underneath the touch sensitive scroll disc.

Unfortunately, its 4GB capacity seems small compared to the 15GB of the base model "large" iPod, which sells for only $50 more. You pay for smallness in this case. Even so, 4GB is enough to hold over 1,000 songs, and there is something to be said for the pure style of the thing. **Michael Hobbs**

FragBox Pzro

www.falcon-nw.com — Price: $1,795.00 (price could change with configuration)

Measuring just 8 inches wide and 12 inches deep, and weighing only 14 pounds, is Falcon Northwest's latest little wonder—the FragBox Pro. Matching performance with PCs four times its size, if you're looking for a cool-looking gaming rig that's very reasonably priced, the FragBox Pro is worth checking out. Under the hood is an Intel Pentium 2.8GHz 800MHz Front Side Bus Processor with Hyper-Thread Technology, a 120 GB HD, a gig of memory and a GeForceFX 5950 Ultra 256MB graphics card. This bad boy even has a DVD/RW. The FragBox Pro also has a USB 2.0 controller with four ports and a 1394a Firewire controller with three ports. Surprisingly, with all of this hardware, and given the clear Plexiglas case, the FragBox Pro was incredibly quiet—thanks to well-placed cooling fans that are out of the way. Game performance was phenomenal. Resource hogs like Halo and Deus Ex 2 ran without any hiccups or problems. As with all Falcon products, the FragBox Pro is easy to recommend. **Tom Ham**

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Spawn i.095, based on the artwork of Spawn issue #95.

Redeemer I.117, based on interior artwork from Spawn issue #117.

Spawn Series 25
Classic Comic Covers 2

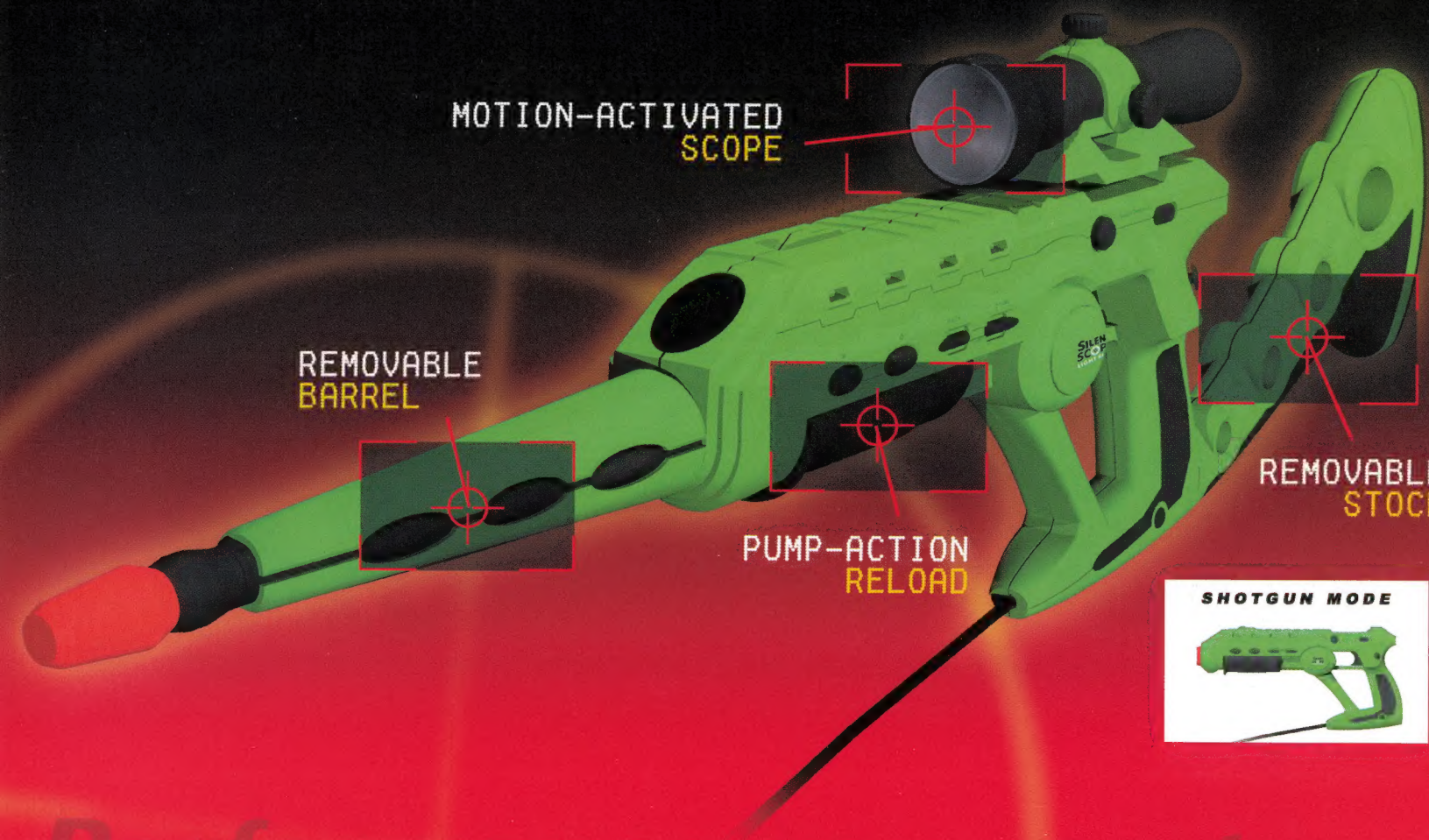
The latest Spawn Series takes up where the last left off, expanding on the theme of bringing comic book artwork to life as action figures (which suits us fine) while expanding beyond the realm of the core Al Simmons Hellspawn, delving much deeper into the Spawn mythos.

Sam and Twitch sti.022, based on the artwork of Sam and Twitch issue #22.

Spawn hsi.011, based on the artwork of Hellspawn issue #11

Spawn hsi.005, based on the artwork of Hellspawn issue #5.

Take the shot.



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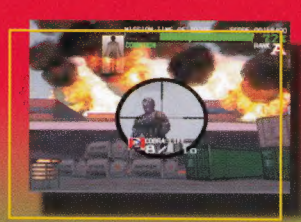

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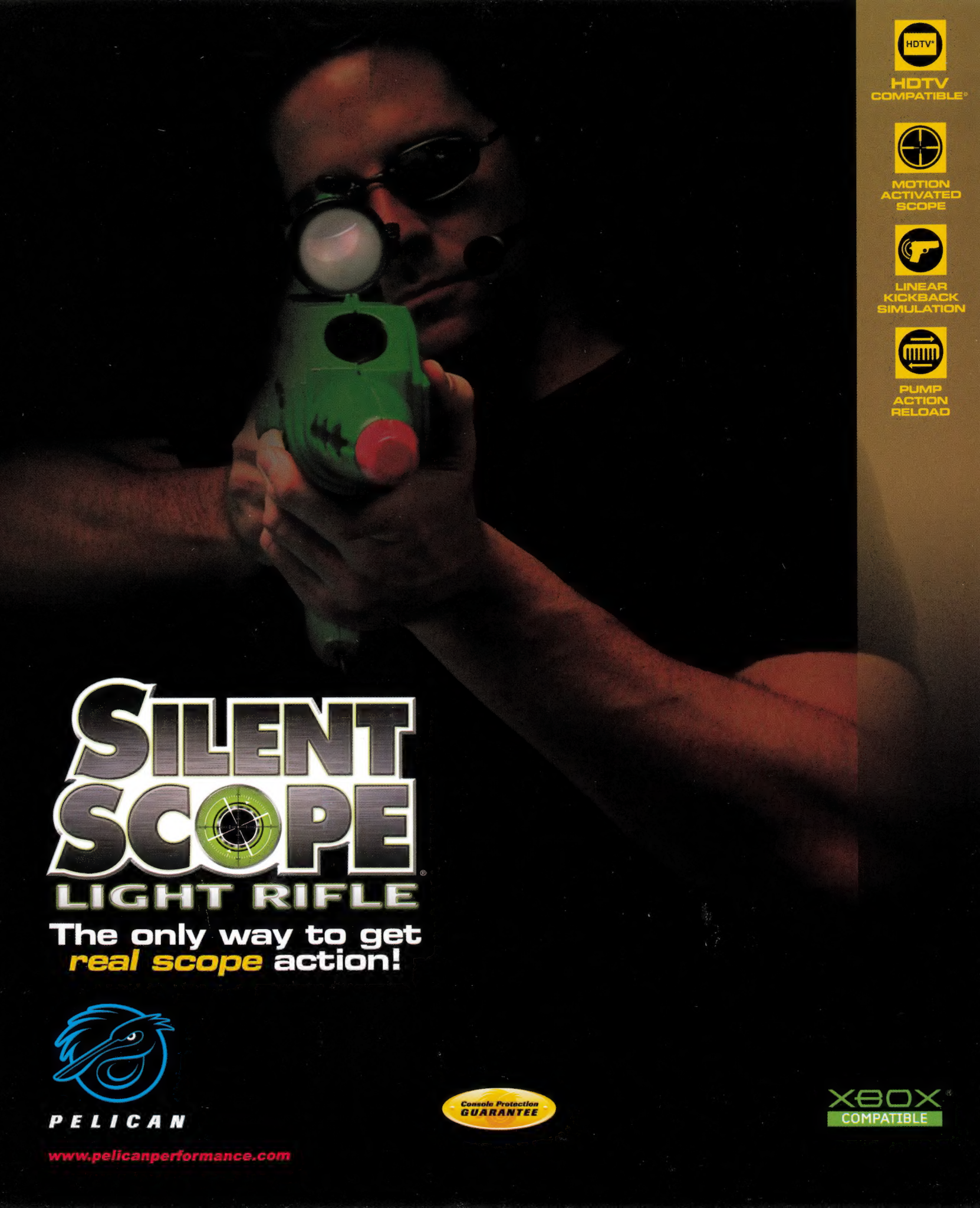
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